Teen And Up Audiences

Graphic Depictions Of Violence

M/M

The Hobbit - J. R. R. Tolkien
The Hobbit - All Media Types
The Hobbit (Jackson Movies)

Bilbo Baggins/Thorin Oakenshield

Bilbo Baggins
Thorin Oakenshield
Balin
Fíli
Kíli
Thorin's Companions
Gandalf
Dwalin
Bifur
Bofur
Nori
Dori
Ori (Tolkien)
Bombur
Glóin
Óin

Fix-It
Violence
Slow Build
Kink Meme
Prompt Fic
injured bilbo
Hurt/Comfort
Major Character Injury
Angst
Drama
thorin is majestic in his angsting
thorin can just sit there and look majestic and i'll still pay to see the movies
BAMF!Bilbo
Freeform
Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies
English Fave_Fanfics_Rereads , The 💫Fairest💫 of Them All , Thorin is Sorry , Grade B

After the Dust Settles

Bgtea

Summary:

“It seems that your bravery has done the impossible and sparked a truce between us and the Elves, fragile as it may be.” At this, the Dwarf king smiled wryly. Who would have thought that a soft Hobbit would have so much sway over the two most powerful figures in this region?

Bilbo Baggins did not respond. He had been deeply unconscious for the past seven days.

Thorin Oakenshield tried not to let his heart break.

An AU retelling of the events before, during, and after the Battle, but not necessarily in that order.

Chapter 1 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/647133/chapters/1176057)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes (#chapter_1_endnotes) .)

30 November, T.A. 2491

The cluster of white healing tents stood as a stark contrast to the miserable, grimy conditions of the surrounding army camp. Inside, the tents were kept clean, warm and blessedly quiet, which provided a reprieve from the hustle and bustle of the outside world. Cots draped in luxurious fur skins were tucked near the walls of the tents to keep the injured comfortable during their recovery or at the very least, comfortable in their last moments on Middle-Earth.

Thorin had long since become accustomed to the sight of the inside of a healing tent; he paid no attention to his surrounding or to the pungent smell of mixed medicinal herbs that was permanently in the air. Instead, he found himself perpetually drawn to the small figure lying prone in the cot. Ever so gently, he reached over to cradle the Hobbit’s left hand in his own scarred ones.

“You would be glad to know that Erebor’s recovery is going well,” he spoke softly as he shifted in his wooden seat from beside the bed. The chair gave a soft creak that seemed too loud in the thick silence of the dimly lit tent. “We are still recovering all those who have fallen in the fields and in the mountain. They would be given a proper burial and we are making plans to erect a monument in their honour.” Thorin’s gaze fell to the hand that he was grasping and he repeatedly traced his finger along the calluses on the Hobbit’s palm, an action that was repeated so often that it had long become automatic.

“Our negotiations between the Men and Elves were successful. One twelfth of the treasure was awarded to the dragonslayer and his men as compensation. Bard of Esgaroth had agreed to use a part of that sum to pay the Elves and for the reparation of Dale.” Thorin grimaced at the thought of Thranduil but he was much too weary to drag up any of his old anger to surface. Not now, not while he was in front of the creature who had paid so much for the tentative peace between his people and his neighbours. He shifted again, trying to find a position that would put less strain on his aching ribs, but to no avail. Wooden chairs were particularly unforgiving to those who have been sitting for a long while, let alone if the sitter was still recovering from previous injuries.

“It seems that your bravery has done the impossible and sparked a truce between us and the Elves, fragile as it may be.” At this, the Dwarf king smiled wryly. Who would have thought that a soft Hobbit would have so much sway over the two most powerful figures in this region? His gentle eyes rove over the slack expression on the Hafling’s face, at his head that was wrapped in thick layers of gauze, and at the tufts of russet curls poking out from the spaces between the bandages.

Bilbo Baggins did not respond. He had remained deeply unconscious for the past seven days.

Thorin Oakenshield tried not to let his heart break.

Clearing his throat, he temporarily let go of Bilbo to reach inside his furred overcoat in search of the item he had stashed close to his body. The Dwarf continued in a hoarse whisper, “Take this knowing that I owe you a great debt, one that I cannot even begin to pay back.” He carefully pulled out the heart of the mountain and placed it in the Hobbit’s palm. Gently, Thorin curled his strong hand over Bilbo’s smaller one, muffling the bright glow of the Arkenstone between their grip. Without letting go of the Hobbit, he guided Bilbo’s hand over to his chest above the covers, so that the clutched stone can rest easily near the Hafling’s heart.

“May the gods protect you and guide you safely back to us.” *And to me*.

Satisfied, Thorin extracted himself from Bilbo’s side and head for the tent’s exit. He would let Bilbo have his rest for now. Afterall, he would be back tomorrow.

23 November, T.A. 2491

The battle ground was a cacophony of screams and clashing sounds from metal striking heavily against metal. The cloying stench of blood was inescapable especially when trapped between the throngs of fighting elves against the never ending waves of Goblins, Orcs and Wargs. Disoriented by the madness around him, Bilbo did not realize that he was unwittingly pushed into the valley until it was too late.

The Hobbit cursed vehemently under his breath at his luck. He could not possibly be in a location that was any worse. Elves, Dwarves, and Men all mingled together, locked in the most intense battles against the goblin army and Bilbo frantically ducked and weaved around them to save his own skin. He may be dressed in mithril chain and a leather helm, but he was hardly a fighter! Aside from the basic swings and blocks that Thorin had taught him, he knew close to nothing about sword handling, let alone fighting effectively with one. He was certainly not well-practiced enough to be a serious threat in a face-to-face combat. Thankfully, the combined power of his magic ring and his fortunately small stature have protected him from decapitation thus far, although he had to duck a few times when an Orc unknowingly swung his mace too close to Bilbo's head for comfort.

A man in front of him staggered and fell face first into the ground when a well-aimed arrow found its way into his neck. Horrified, Bilbo watched as the felled warrior futilely clawed at the protruding arrow shaft; his actions quickly becoming more and more sluggish as the seconds pass by. When the man finally stilled completely, the Hobbit knew that the warrior was no more. Numbly, Bilbo noticed that the black scorched earth beneath the body was rapidly becoming slick with blood and the Hobbit thought to himself that this was as close to hell as any place he has ever visited.

It took every ounce of strength in his body to keep him from being frozen, but somehow, he had managed to keep moving. Tightening his hold over Sting, Bilbo could feel his heart pounding rapidly in his chest as a renewed sense of pure, unadulterated fear coursed through his body. He knew that he was desperately lost and that he needed to find a safe place to hide, immediately. Looking around quickly, he spotted the cliffs of the Southern spur looming above the fighting crowd, atop which the Elvenking and the Elven archers were firing volleys of arrows at their foes. If he could just make his way back up those cliffs, he would be safe or at the very least, he could protect himself by burrowing inside the nooks and crevasses at the base of those stone walls. The sooner he escaped the death trap in the valley, the better chance he had of surviving.

Just as he was about to gather his courage to make a mad dash for safety, a loud thundering roar sounded from above, startling the Hobbit and all those around him to look up. To his horror and to the dismay of his allies, a fresh wave of Orcs had appeared to join the battle and they were so numerous that from a distance, they looked like a menacing swarm of swirling black mass. They had descended along the northern ridges of the mountain, recklessly streaming down to rain fresh hell on the armies below. The Elves and Men, whose spirits were high just moments ago from their quick work against their foes, were quickly surrounded and all hopes for victory evaporated in an instance. Thranduil and his group of archers tried valiantly to defend their position but they were slowly losing ground to the onslaught of attacks. With the Southern spur being overrun by the advancing Goblin cavalry, Bilbo's plans for safety were dashed to pieces and his heart sank at the foreboding thought.

It was in the darkest moment, in the midst of a losing battle that hope came in the form of Thorin Oakenshield.

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05 November, T.A. 2491

Never in a million years could Bilbo have guessed that at some point in his admittedly sedated life, he would get to see the sun set over the Lonely Mountain. And yet there he was, somewhere in the northern wing of the fortress, on a set of sturdy balconies constructed from the dark stones that were mined from the mountain itself. Centuries of exposure to the mountain winds had worn away the stones' polished surface and decorative carvings, leaving them barren and smooth. Once upon a time, these balconies would have been filled with Dwarven archers who kept constant vigilance over the dangers beyond the fortress' gates. Now, the area was deserted and silent.

Not that Bilbo had minded the quiet, of course. He rather enjoyed this rare moment of peacefulness away from the rambunctious group of Dwarves. Never mind that he had discovered this area completely by accident after being dragged off to go exploring by Fíli and Kíli …and subsequently abandoned when they forgot about him.

"Well then, it looks like the brothers are missing out," Bilbo huffed out loud. "Just look at this place!"

The balconies gave the Hobbit a fantastic view of the wild lands from the mountain's northern ridges. Judging from the wildly growing vegetation and the lack of scorched marks, this area has been spared from the devastation of Smaug's dragon fire. The same cannot be said for the ruined southern portions of Erebor that still bore the scars of the dragon's attack from decades before. Below the mountain, the Hafling could see the never-ending expand of rolling hills and grasslands.

Bilbo could understand why the Dwarves have come to fiercely love their home when surrounded by the majestic beauty of Erebor.

"There you are, Master Baggins!"

Bilbo turned to grin at Thorin as the Dwarf strode out to meet him. "Hello there! Don't mind me! I'm just enjoying the view."

The King under the Mountain gave him a small smile and hummed in response. He rested his hands on the stone railings and gazed out with a look of utter serenity. It was an expression that Bilbo had never seen the king wear, and it caught him so surprised that the Hobbit could only continue to stare on, mesmerized. Frankly, it was amazing how *different* the Dwarf looked when he wasn't sporting his habitual grimaces or frowns. With all the tension and anger drained away, Thorin looked remarkably younger and more approachable.

Under the blazing sky, the Dwarf's profile was highlighted, accentuating his aquiline nose, his brow bone, and square jaw. Bilbo viciously silenced the part of his mind that *repeatedly* pointed out that Thorin Oakenshield made quite the regal handsome figure.

Of course he'd look peaceful, everything turned out for the better, Bilbo thought in an effort to *stop* thinking about Thorin and his blasted handsomeness. The dragon was dead and the Dwarves have completed what they've set out to do by reclaiming Erebor. The company had worked on fortifying the main gate and at the pace they were going, they could soon move on to doing other things that will rapidly return the fortress to its former glory. At the moment, the only pressing matter in Thorin's mind was to find the Arkenstone from the treasure horde and to deal with the elves and men. The latter situation would be dealt with once Dáin Ironfoot's army arrived. Victory was pretty much in his grasp and Bilbo could see why Thorin could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Bilbo also ignored the stab of guilt at keeping the Arkenstone away from Thorin. He had become alarmingly good at dodging unpleasant things that he did not want to handle.

"And what do you think of the view, Master Hobbit?"

The Hafling shook his head lightly to shake out of his reverie. "Oh, uhm. It's beautiful! This is the most north I've been and I've never seen anything quite like it," Bilbo stammered, still a bit flustered from the thoughts he had circling in his head. Then, realizing the banality of his answer and feeling a bit embarrassed by it, he hastily continued, "But of course, you'd know this already. It's not like I've set foot outside of the Shire until this adventure."

Thorin's lips quirked at Bilbo's rambling and his soft blue eyes turned to look at the Hobbit. "If you think this is beautiful, you would have loved the view from the south of the mountain." His gaze flickered briefly beyond the balcony, lost in memory. "Before Smaug had charred the land, the valley outside of the main gate was always in full bloom. Men from Dale would often visit the valley to collect flowers, either to be used for decorations during festivals or to be woven into circlets as gifts for their intended."

"I think this is the first time I've heard anyone speak about Dale at great lengths. How was it like?" Bilbo asked timidly with a shy smile on his face. Although their relationship had come a long way from the beginning of the quest, Bilbo did not like to impose upon the private memories of others if he could help it. His scholarly side, however, was more than eager to learn about this once great city and it was that that had made him bold enough to ask.

Fortunately, Thorin did not seem to mind the question. "Bright, noisy, and compact," he said automatically. At the Hafling's expectant look, the Dwarf paused to dredge up old memories of the city before he could elaborate further. "It was a rich city that had prospered from trade for many centuries, especially between men and Dwarves. The streets were peaceful, the people were well fed, and for the most part, the citizens had little to worry about. Overall, it was a happy, sunny place." Again he stopped, trying to see what else he could remember.

"I have visited the city less than I would like," Thorin ruefully admitted, "most of the times I visited tend to be for short, diplomatic missions."

"Oh." Bilbo was disappointed but it couldn't be helped. Thorin had his royal duties to consider over taking leisurely strolls through neighbouring kingdoms. "Wait, you said 'most' of the visits were for diplomatic reasons. What about those that weren't?"

Thorin grinned, suddenly remembering a story from long ago. He had never told it to anyone and those who knew the event had long since forgotten it in the face of the multiple tragedies that followed Smaug's destruction. The enthusiastic response he had gotten from Bilbo made him willing to share though.

“When I was young, much younger than Kili or Ori, I wanted to know what the world was like beyond the walls of Erebor.”

He continued more bashfully, “I had decided to set out on what would be a grand adventure, and I had chosen to venture into Dale on my own.”

Bilbo listened in rapt attention. *What are the odds that anyone has heard Thorin Oakenshield share one of his childhood stories?* The Hobbit thought, feeling chuffed.

“One night, I snuck out from the fortress with two days’ worth of supplies and a pony. I headed south and rode through the night. By morning, I was exhausted and in pain from being on horseback for so long.” The Dwarven king chuckled quietly at that memory. If it wasn’t for the fact that he had to endure an excruciatingly long ride *back* to Erebor, he would have been more than happy to end his adventuring then and there.

“I decided to press forward on my trip and I managed to arrive just in time to see the city wake up. Vendors of different races from different corners of Middle-Earth were rapidly setting up shop along the streets. They were selling many exotic items that I did not recognize.”

“And so, I grew curious. For the rest of the day, I made a pest of myself, asking all manners of questions to satiate my curiosity. That was until I found myself forcefully dragged away by a soldier.”

“He was assigned to keep the peace and he thought I was planning to rob the merchants. Apparently, I intimidated them.”

That startled a bark of laughter from Bilbo. The image of a young Thorin, with his iconic angry scowl and furrowed brows, being hauled away by the scruff of his coat after he had terrorized the merchants for answers was too much. “So what happened next? Did you get away?” The Hobbit was openly grinning at Thorin’s misfortune but the Dwarf could not find it in himself to mind.

“No,” Thorin shook his head, still bemused at the memory. He had made a complete scene in the middle of the market square by struggling against the soldier’s grip and hollering loudly as we was forcefully led away. “I was saved by the Dwarven guards who were sent by my father to search for me. They had arrived in time to escort me out of trouble.” The look of horror on that soldier’s face as he realized that he had manhandled an Erebor prince was spectacular.

“Well then,” Bilbo said with a cheeky grin, “at least now I see where Fíli and Kíli had gotten their mischievous sides from! You were just as bad as they are when you were young!”

The face that Thorin made from being compared to his nephews was what one would expect to see from someone cruelly tricked into biting a lemon; his face was contorted into a disgusted grimace and his eyes were wide, looking so thoroughly *appalled, offended and betrayed*. It was *absolutely priceless*. It would take a great man not to react.

Unfortunately for the Dwarf, Bilbo Baggins was most definitely *not* that person and the Hobbit burst uproariously into laughter.

Thorin was not impressed.

“I was nothing like Fíli and Kíli,” he mumbled sullenly under his breath. Bilbo only laughed harder.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” The Hobbit wiped the tears streaming down his face. He struggled valiantly to compose himself before he offended the king but every now and then, he would remember *that face and by Eru*, it would set him off again.

Thorin resolutely turned away from Bilbo to stare stubbornly off the balcony, but the Hafling could see that his lips had that same small quirk from before.

They shared a moment of comfortable silence, interrupted only by the stray chuckles that the Hobbit could not contain. Bilbo could not remember the last time he had a good laugh like that and he felt a warm rush of affection towards the Dwarf.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” Bilbo said, still grinning widely and eyes shining. “I can see how much Erebor means to you, given all the memories that you must have of this place.” Thorin hummed in agreement to his words.

The Hobbit moved to put his arms on the railing, then pushed himself up on tip toes. The sun had just about disappeared into the horizon and the sky was rapidly darkening, but Bilbo wanted to take one last look before it got too dark to see anything. From the distance, he spotted a small flock of thrushes flying by and the Hafling was reminded of Thror’s map, of the moon runes, and all the trouble they’ve been through to get to this mountain fortress. However, to have befriended and aided this cast of odd Dwarves made everything worth it in the end.

“I am glad that you have found your home again,” Bilbo said softly but sincerely. Underneath that gruff exterior and Dwarven pride, Thorin Oakenshield was loyal, good, and caring. He was someone who had worked hard and suffered much but despite it all, he had persevered admirably. “You deserve a place that would make you happy.”

And because he couldn’t help himself, he turned to Thorin with a mischievous, teasing smirk on his lips. “Maybe later on when everything has settled, you can tell me more adventures that you went on in your wayward youth. I’m sure you were the shining example of decorum.”

Thorin turned to look at Bilbo with wide eyes, mouth opening and closing a few times but no words came out. Then unexpectedly, his eyes crinkled in mirth and he let loose a deep boisterous laugh that warmed the Hobbit's heart. The Dwarven king grabbed the Hobbit by the shoulders in a gentle hold and whispered a heartfelt *Thank You,* too breathless to say anything else.

Surprised by this turn of events, all the Hafling could do at the moment was stand still. Thorin was smiling at him tenderly, watching him as if he was someone precious…as if he was the most *beautiful* thing the Dwarf had ever laid eyes on, and Bilbo realized that he did not mind, *not one bit*. In fact, he would *gladly* spend the rest of his life on that balcony as long as the Dwarf continued to hold him and look at him like that.

…

Oh.

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25 November, T.A. 2491

Broken right wrist, minor cuts and bruises along the arms, torso, and face, large cut above the brow…

"Thorin, it is time for the healers to check on your bandages."

And a severe injury to the side of the head, likely caused by a blow from a striking object...

"Thorin, please. You've been sitting here for the past two days. At least take an hour to tend to your own wounds. We can even ask Óin to prepare a fresh batch of his salves, if you like."

Our apologies, your Majesty, but we're doing all that we can to slow the bleeding and the swelling.

We won't know the extent of his head injury until he wakes.

Balin sighed when it became apparent that his pleading was left unanswered. He looked helplessly at his despondent king. Whatever thoughts that have captured Thorin's attention have kept him firmly in their grasp, leaving the brooding Dwarf to sit quietly for days beside their injured Hobbit in the healing tent.

Among Thorin's company, those who were well enough to venture out of their beds had all tried to lure their stubborn King out of that blasted chair. Despite all the cajoling (Nori and Ori), insulting (Bifur, in a slew of guttural Khuzdul and violent hand gestures), bribing with food (Bombur), and threats made to bodily remove him away (Dwalin and Dori), none of the Dwarves were successful. And so, the task of talking sense into Thorin finally fell to Balin, who was just released from the healers' clutches after being deemed healthy enough to move around. He was fortunate enough to have only suffered a leg injury.

His luck was failing him here though. Balin couldn't say he had more success at achieving what his friends could not.

However, the wise Dwarf also knew that sometimes, words became meaningless in the face of grief.

Resigned that he would not be getting through to his king by talking, at least for the moment, he silently hobbled over to Thorin's side to place a comforting hand on the Dwarf's stiff shoulder. Thorin, who normally carried himself with an air of dignity, whose proud, imposing figure demanded the respect and attention of those around him, crumbled beneath Balin's kind gesture. His back stooped low as if Balin's hand had carried the weight of the world.

Sighing again, Balin leaned over to the small table beside Thorin to fish out the mug of cooling, medicinal tea among the platter of food, bottles of salves, and rolls of fresh bandages. Their friends had probably gone through the trouble to keep the table well stocked in hopes that Thorin could at least reach over and tend to himself, seeing as he was too stubborn to leave his chair. He carefully placed the mug in the Dwarven king's hand before stealing a glance at Bilbo's prone and injured form.

Buried in blankets on a cot far too large for any halfling and covered in all manners of salves and bandages, Bilbo looked heart-breakingly fragile. Balin had become so used to seeing their burglar as a spirited and witty individual, that this unnatural stillness in his friend greatly perturbed him. Although he was breathing easily enough, Bilbo's face was pallid and gaunt. He was peppered in cuts; the most severe one located at the top of his right brow and the old Dwarf was certain that this angry, jagged wound would scar. The Hobbit was also wearing a cast over his right hand, though his left was thankfully spared from any damage. By far, the most alarming injury lay beneath the thick layers of newly wrapped bandages around his head. Spots of pink had already made their way through the gauze.

"He could die thinking that I still hated him."

Pardon my honesty, your Grace, but we're uncertain if he would recover.

Clearing his throat lightly as if he had not heard the hollowness in Thorin's voice, Balin asked, "And if he were to wake right now, what would you say?"

At that, the king straightened and looked up at Balin. For the first time that evening, some of his old spark has returned in his eyes. "I would take back every harsh words and deeds I have spoken at the Gates," he answered with

renewed ferocity and conviction. “I would tell him that what I said could not have been farther from the truth.”

He paused to draw in a harsh breath, unsure of what he wanted to add when he had *so much* floating around his head, so much to choose from. He was visibly more subdued when he said, “I would also tell him that it would be an honour to have him back with me. If he was still willing to have me, that is.”

Ah, well that confirms it, Balin thought to himself, satisfied by that revelation while trying not to show his amusement through his expression. He had long suspected that the king and the Hafling shared a much deeper bond than those of friendship, despite what was said at the Gates. *If only this came at a happier time*.

All the strength that Thorin had gathered moments ago had fled him with that last confession and the Dwarf sagged back into his chair. “I’m not sure if these words would do any good anymore,” he spoke with resignation hanging over him.

Alright, Balin thought grimly. The scant traces of good humour left him only to be replaced by a slow, burning anger. *This has gone on for long enough.*

“You act as if our dear Bilbo has passed on already,” the old Dwarf said indignantly, feeling insulted for the poor Hobbit, “when he is lying beside you, continuing to draw in breath as we speak!”

“We have constantly underestimated him during our journey but time and time again, has he not shown his strength?” Balin continued and by Durin's beard, he will get what he has to say through Thorin’s thick skull! “He has faced the pale Orc and his servants, the giant spiders of Mirkwood, the countless Goblins and Wargs,” he listed with great flourish, “The dragon! In the face of all these adversaries, he has lived and has grown stronger since. Did his accomplishments mean so little to you that you have already dismissed them from your thoughts?”

He reached over to give his friend a small shake by the shoulders as he gentled his tone. “Let us honour him instead by not repeating this mistake. As long as his heart beats, we can be assured that Bilbo is fighting to get back to us.”

Thorin swallowed heavily and for a few precious seconds, he could not respond. Finally, he gave a wordless little nod. Balin relaxed his grip and allowed a small tendril of hope to curl into his heart.

“Good,” he nodded back. “But when Bilbo wakes up, he will need his friend whole and hale, as well as Erebor and its people. They too need their king healthy.”

“Come. Let us tend to your wounds.” As Balin turned away from the chair to fetch more bandages, he saw Thorin, out of the corner of his eyes, taking a tentative sip from his mug.

Notes:

Hello, lovely readers! Thank you so much for taking the time to trudge through my writing! This is the first time I’ve written a fanfic in the history of…ever, so I am eager to see how well or poorly I’ve done. This is also the first time I’ve contributed anything to the The Hobbits/LOTR fandom, although I’ve been lurking around reading fanfics like a madwoman. Yes, it’s a lot of first times for me and I am still reeling over the fact that I’ve got this behemoth started.

The idea behind this fic originally came from a prompter at the kink meme, who wanted the dwarves to comfort a hurt Bilbo (link: http://hobbit-kink.livejournal.com/3138.html?thread=4420674#t4420674). I’ve somehow interpreted that as a ‘fix-it fic where everyone lives but Thorin angsts like a mofo’. From there on, this story just grew and grew. No, I do not understand my own thought processes either, but I hope some of you are entertained by what came out of it nonetheless.

Other random facts about this chapter (may contain book spoilers):

[1] Regarding Bard’s reward – in the book, he originally asked for one twelfth of the treasure since Smaug had also stolen from Dale. This meant that a part of the treasure under Erebor belonged to the descendents of the King of Dale (ie. Bard, the badass). From that portion, Bard was perfectly content in paying for his people’s needs to get them back on their feet as well as to pay the elves for their help. Honestly, I thought this was a pretty reasonable offer, but then again, I’m not the one driven half-insane with gold lust.

I can’t in good conscience have Thorin pay Thranduil though. The elf was a bit of a dick, so he’ll just have to settle with sharing with Bard.

[2] Bilbo clutching the Arkenstone near his heart was meant to mimic the events in canon, when Thorin was buried with the Arkenstone placed on his chest. Ouch.

[3] The Battle was extremely easy to write after I’ve done enough research to figure out just what the heck was going on. I struggled to churn out the emotional scenes but I can’t say the same for the gory, violent, fighting bits. I’m not sure what this says about me as a person.

[4] The fluff moment was a last minute add-in after I've gone over my original plan for the fic and realized that I do not have enough Bilbo/Thorin interaction parts. For a fic based on this pairing, that…was rather sad.

[5] Out of all the dwarves who could most likely talk some sense into Thorin, I've always pictured Balin as the one to succeed. Being the close advisor of the king as well as possessing a healthy dose of wisdom and common sense, Balin's advice is most definitely well respected.

More to come later and thanks for reading! Comment and kudos if you're liking this so far.

Chapter 2 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/647133/chapters/1193230)

Notes:

A massive thank you to my generous beta ArielT for being amazing and amazingly patient enough to trudge through my literary trainwreck.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_2_endnotes) .)

09 November, T.A. 2491

The Hobbit once heard a saying that went something like this: *Pride is the ultimate vice to the elves as greed is to the Dwarves*. After spending the past few weeks in Erebor, Bilbo Baggins was beginning to think that no truer statement has ever been said.

The construction work on the fortification along the main gates had been everyone's priority when they had first arrived, but as time went on, the sense of fervor rapidly disappeared, and the Dwarves noticeably slowed down in their pace. At first, Bilbo thought that the Dwarves must have felt confident of the defense they would receive from Dáin Ironfoot's army, but that explanation did not sit well with him. He suspected that something more dangerous was at play.

Bilbo began to notice that one by one, the members of the company were spending increasingly more time in the treasure room. It wasn't as if they were doing anything productive in there either; most of the time, they were mucking around in the precious gems or gazing, mesmerized, at the mounds of silver and gold around them. When Bilbo gently reminded them to get back to work, their mood would quickly turn foul. Even Thorin, who had been so strong in his conviction to reclaim his home, had been affected by this madness. The king had become increasingly obsessed with treasure and in finding the most important piece of all, the Arkenstone. After attempting for a week to locate the precious gem with the help of his nephews, he had ordered all hands on deck to scour through the enormous room during every morning and evening. The Dwarves were more than delighted by that decision, but Bilbo's spirits dropped even further. This search was needlessly reducing their much needed construction time.

"The others may not have a problem with this but I do. What on Middle-Earth is going on?" Bilbo muttered to himself, feeling increasingly frustrated by the ridiculousness of everyone's behaviour lately. Instead of working on the stone wall at the front gates like they *all* should be doing, he was kneeling over a pile of small coins, pretending to sift through them to look for the Arkenstone.

At least he wasn't the only one uselessly wasting time. He could hear the loud guffaws from Fíli and Kíli as they used jewel-encrusted chalices to catch the golden coins that Glóin, Dwalin, and Bifur threw at them. Ori was happily making a sketch of an elaborate statuette in his leather booklet while beside him, Dori, Óin and Balin were having a spirited discussion on the medical properties of precious metals, if they even existed. Bombur, who had burrowed into a large pile of gold for a nap earlier on, continued to sleep uninterrupted, and Nori was idly showing parlor tricks to Bofur by making coins disappear from his hands. Meanwhile, their illustrious leader Thorin had stepped out to receive a message from the ravens and had not yet returned.

By the Valar, it's a complete circus in here!

Maybe it was time for Bilbo to confess to Thorin that he had found the stone already… but he was feeling oddly hesitant about that idea.

Well first off, there's no guarantee that by giving the Arkenstone back, it would fix anything, Bilbo thought grimly. And indeed he might be right; the Dwarves were already entranced by the treasure pile to the point of obsession. The presence of the Arkenstone could very much end up exacerbating the situation.

More importantly, something told Bilbo that he might need the gem later and that it was in his best interest to hold on to it. Having learned not to ignore his gut feeling, the Halfling decided to keep the stone for now. *Maybe I can try talking to Thorin myself about focusing more of our attention on the wall.*

Bilbo had felt something shift in his relationship with the Dwarven king ever since that fateful day on the balcony. Although he normally came off as a bit distant from everyone, Thorin no longer had the same reservations with Bilbo. They had spent the past few days constantly in each other's company, from doing simple things like dining next to each other to partnering up in lengthy searches for supplies around the fortress. Even when they were searching for the Arkenstone in the treasure room, Thorin was always by his side, taking the time to explain the different stories behind some of the more spectacular pieces of jewelry, head pieces, and armour. In return, Bilbo had found himself swapping stories of his family, Hobbit customs, and the Shire. It was surprisingly pleasant and Bilbo would have had a much more enjoyable time if it wasn't for his escalating worry for the Dwarves' increasing fixation for the treasure, or the constant, gnawing guilt from hiding the Arkenstone.

This newfound closeness between the Hobbit and the Dwarf did not go unnoticed by the rest of the Company either. Just the other day during supper, Fíli gave Bilbo the most ridiculous eyebrow waggle when Thorin moved to sit beside the Hobbit. Kíli's response wasn't any better; he gave a cheeky wink and two very enthusiastic thumbs up before skirting away. The other Dwarves gave strong, affectionate pats to the Halfling's shoulder and back. At least Bilbo knew where he stood when it came to the Dwarves' approval and for that he was very glad.

At the sound of Thorin's heavy steps echoing towards the treasure room, all the Dwarves froze comically before bolting desperately to the nearest pile of treasure, pretending to be hard at work. Bilbo saw Bofur kicking Bombur awake from the corner of his eye.

It was lucky that everyone had such fast reflexes too because a split second after the last Dwarf had made himself look busy, Thorin strode into the treasure room with a deep scowl on his face.

"Roäc has delivered news that the armies of Men and Elves are approaching faster than we had anticipated," Thorin started immediately, annoyance and displeasure colouring his words. "At their current pace, they will no doubt reach the mountain before Dáin."

The Dwarves let out a cacophony of groans and hisses. From behind Bilbo, Dwalin asked loudly in his deep, gruff voice, "When will they get here?"

"In seven days or so. Ten at most."

A louder surge of outcries came from the Dwarves and Thorin held up a hand for silence.

"How goes the construction work on the wall?"

"We have built most of it, but we still have about a quarter of the work left to finish," Balin answered.

"Good," the Dwarven king nodded to his advisor. "This is what we will do: Fíli, Kíli, Ori, and Bilbo will continue the search for the stone. The rest of the company will focus on the wall."

Bilbo could not believe this. Even now at such a crucial moment, Thorin refused to let go of his mad obsession with the Arkenstone. What made it even worse was that none of the other Dwarves looked like they were disagreeing. Finally fed up, the Hobbit intervened:

"Wait a minute, why are we bothering with the search at the moment? Shouldn't we all be working on that barricade?"

"The Heart of the Mountain is the heirloom to the Durin line and it must be found at all cost, especially now that our enemies are marching closer to Erebor," Thorin said gravely. "I will not rest until it is safely guarded by my hands and away from those greedy thieves, who would not hesitate to use it as leverage against me."

Bilbo recognized from the furrowing of brows and deepening frown on the Dwarf's face that Thorin had stubbornly made up his mind. Nonetheless, the Hobbit was relieved to have discovered that the king's mistrust of others was the root of his seeming obsession with finding the Arkenstone. The combative tone to the Dwarf's voice was *very* worrisome, but maybe, the Hobbit could reason with him. The *last* thing they needed right now was a war on their hands.

"How are we even *certain* that they wanted to steal from us? I can understand your distrust for the Elves, but the Men of Lake-town have done nothing to warrant such hostilities." Bilbo could feel the heavy gaze of the entire room on him. He did his best to ignore it as he continued. "From what Roäc told us at that guard post, they were only seeking amends for their losses from Smaug's destruction."

"And what right do they have to make such demands from me?" Thorin exclaimed in disbelief and anger. "The treasure rightfully belonged to the Dwarves and it was stolen from us by that dragon! Why should we have to amend the evils that creature has committed?"

"Because we were the ones who angered it in our attempt to take back the mountain!" This conversation was quickly spiralling downwards and judging from Thorin's thunderous expression, the Dwarven king was well aware of this.

"What do you suppose we should have done done instead, Master Baggins?" Thorin hissed, voice low and dangerous as he stalked closer to the Hobbit. "Let the dragon keep Erebor while we watched the folk of Durin lay scattered across Middle-Earth? Do nothing but watch as our home is forever lost to us while that *beast* makes a mockery of my people's legacy?"

"No! That is not what I'm saying at all!" Bilbo threw his hands up, deeply frustrated by just about everything. He was doing a *terrible* job at convincing Thorin but at this point, he did not even care anymore. *Gandalf was right! Save me from the stubbornness of Dwarves!* He thought angrily. He struggled to grit out, "I'm suggesting that we should at least extend the Men the courtesy of a negotiation!"

"There is absolutely nothing to negotiate about!" Thorin roared out. "And if you believe that they are marching here for a simple chat, then you are a bigger fool than I had originally thought! If they simply wanted to *negotiate* as you have so prettily suggested, why would they come to the mountain armed and carrying banners for war?"

But the Dwarf was not done yet. He was livid and would not stop until he had spoken his piece. "No, I will not risk anyone from the Company or any part of the treasure for some flimsy notion of peace with these Men! I understand that you are used to the comfortable ways of the Shire, but out here, not everything can be settled over talks during tea time and cakes," Thorin snarled out derisively. "You'd best remember that, Master Baggins!"

A heavy silence descended in the room and the other Dwarves shifted nervously in place but neither the king nor the Hobbit took any notice. Bilbo had clenched his fists so tightly on either side of his body that the knuckles had turned white. Gently, he willed his hands to relax and took a deep, calming breath. He schooled his face to a neutral expression.

"As your Majesty commands," the Halfling said in a tightly controlled voice with just a hint of sarcasm bleeding through. "Now if you would excuse me, I have somewhere else I would like to be." Bilbo gave Thorin a stiff little bow in mockery before he strode resolutely towards the exit with his head held high and his back iron rod straight. He did not bother to look back at the shocked expression on all the Dwarves' faces.

The absolute nerve of that Dwarf!

Bilbo stalked along the corridor, not paying attention in the least to where he was going. He just wanted *out* and the faster the better.

'Not everything can be settled over talks during tea time', he said! And to think that I willingly shared those stories about Hobbit culture with him, thinking that he was genuinely interested.

Still walking at a furiously fast pace for a Hobbit, he automatically rounded a corner and climbed up the flight of spiralling staircases. In the back of his mind, he was dimly aware that he was heading somewhere north of the fortress.

Instead, he was probably mocking me for my 'soft' ways. He certainly has done a fine job of throwing my own stories back in my face.

The feeling of wind rustling his hair surprised him. Bilbo looked up to find that his feet had led him back to the same balcony from four days ago. Under the pale, cold light of the moon, Bilbo could barely make the bumps and dips of the hills out in the distance. The stars, on the other hand, were easily spotted. They peppered the expanse of the dark indigo night sky, coming off as white pinpricks of glowing light.

Entranced, the Hobbit found himself moving to the edge of the railing. He leaned against the stone banister as he stood on tip toes like he had done the last time he was there. The Halfling tilted his head towards the night sky trying to spot the constellations. He snorted softly in annoyance when he picked out the star formation for Pimpernel the Merchant. How fitting for Bilbo to have found the constellation of a grocer out of all the others.

And it looks like nothing has changed after all. The Dwarves still see me as a soft grocer.

The Halfling took a step back from the railing to wrap his arms protectively around himself. His thoughts turned more sombre.

He was right about one thing though. Bilbo Baggins, you are a fool. You are a fool to think that he would ever care for your opinions. And he was a fool twice-over for caring so much for the Dwarf, for being so ridiculously *happy* over this newfound sense of closeness, that he had inadvertently let Thorin's words cut deeper than he could have predicted.

Bilbo harshly rubbed away the dampness in his eyes with the back of his hands. Like *hell* he would let that Dwarf get to him like that. He was sick and tired of being treated as if he did not know any better.

I never got to talk to him about prioritizing the wall's construction.

The stray thought made him choke out a bitter, short bark of laugher. He wasn't even sure if he could muster the energy to go back to their camp site. Bilbo felt hollowed out and so very *tired* by everything on this quest – the dragon, the Dwarves, that ruddy Arkenstone. He hasn't felt this homesick since before they reached Rivendell.

"Bilbo."

The Hobbit stiffened slightly but otherwise, he did not react to his name being called. He even refused to acknowledge Thorin's presence when the Dwarf moved closer to place a large, warm hand on his back in what obviously was an attempt to placate the Halfling. *Let that stubborn Dwarf stand there awkwardly and freeze for all I care,* Bilbo thought vindictively.

But Thorin would not be deterred. Tentatively, the Dwarf ran his hand from the base of the Hobbit's neck down the length of his back, tracing the curvature of the spine. The soothing ministration of his touch was the absolute *last* straw for the Halfling and Bilbo whirled around to face the king, slapping the hand away.

“Oh, so I’m Bilbo now. I thought I was Master Baggins from the Shire, completely ignorant to the ways of the world! Which one is it?” Bilbo snapped, letting the hurt he felt show.

Thorin flinched at the face of the Hobbit’s anger. “I apologize, Bilbo,” he said softly, choosing his words carefully. “What I said was out of line, and I should not have let my temper get the better of me.”

He took the Halfling’s silence as permission to continue, “I never meant to belittle what you have told me in confidence, especially when you were so generous in sharing the memories that you obviously hold near and dear to your heart.”

“But while you are gentle, kind, and willing to listen to reason, I cannot assume that the Men of Lake-town have the same honourable intentions, not when they are allied with those Elves,” Thorin said gently but insistently. A small habitual frown made its way to his face at the mere mention of Elves. “And even if they do make demands for compensation, I do not believe that those damages are ours to pay.”

Bilbo clenched his jaw and looked away, clearly displeased, but he refrained from voicing out his complaints. Thorin reached for the Hobbit and pulled him closer until they were flush against each other, his hands resting comfortably over the Hobbit’s hips like they belonged there. Slowly, he raised his right hand to cradle the side of Bilbo’s head, his thumb gently sweeping along the Hobbit’s smooth, wind-chilled cheek. Bilbo shivered in pleasure, and he fought against the overwhelming urge to lean into the warmth.

“I truly am deeply sorry, Bilbo,” the Dwarf murmured and the Hobbit could feel the warmth of his breath against his temple. “You are not just Master Baggins from the Shire, you… are more important to me than I have the words to explain.”

“You have been dear to me for a long time now, ever since you jumped in front of the Defiler to protect me,” Thorin continued in earnest and Bilbo felt the grip on his hip tighten noticeably. When he finally registered what the Dwarven king had said, the Hobbit quickly looked up in surprise, feeling the beginning of a spectacular blush spreading along his cheeks. Thorin chuckled softly in response and moved his hand away from the side of the burglar’s face to brush under the edge of his jaw, keeping Bilbo’s head tilted up towards him.

“I just wish I had the courage to tell you that earlier.” Standing this close to Thorin, Bilbo closed his eyes and breathed in the familiar scent of leather, iron, and oddly enough, sandalwood. They were smells that the Hobbit had come to associate with the Dwarf, with the feeling of *protection,* and it made Bilbo relax further into Thorin’s hold. He so desperately wanted to plunge his fingers into the thick fur of Thorin’s cloak, to burrow against the Dwarf’s chest and just *forget* about all of his troubles.

Bilbo felt Thorin move his hand to the back of his neck. His fingers and palm leaving a hot trail on heated skin. “And if you would permit it,” the Dwarf started, his voice low and thick with desire, “I would very much like to kiss you now.”

Swallowing hard, Bilbo opened his eyes to meet Thorin’s heated gaze. “You do not play fair, Thorin Oakenshield,” he whispered hoarsely.

And with that, Bilbo grabbed Thorin by the front of his cloak and kissed him passionately.

If Thorin was surprised by this turn of events, he did not show it. Instead, he eagerly returned the kiss; his left hand snaked up the Hobbit’s side and across his back while he slanted his mouth over Bilbo’s to press his tongue teasingly between the Hobbit’s lips. Bilbo allowed the intrusion, and he parted his lips with a soft moan. He curled his own tongue against Thorin’s, hungrily savouring the taste and the delicious press of the Dwarf’s larger body over his. He released his desperate hold on Thorin’s cloak to glide his hands across the Dwarf’s chest in exploration before wrapping both arms around Thorin’s torso, pulling them even closer together. The Dwarf groaned in approval and he moved his right hand up along Bilbo’s neck so that he could bury his fingers into the Hobbit’s hair.

Bilbo did not know how long they have been kissing on that balcony when Thorin gently pulled back to nip along the fleshy column of the Hobbit’s neck. He sucked on a sensitive spot by the jaw, and Bilbo was left to gasp and whimper helplessly beneath his ministrations, except to move his hands to uselessly clutch on to Thorin’s sides. The Dwarf left a last kiss on Bilbo’s pointy ear before straightening. Seeing Bilbo’s shivering and dishevelled state made him grin smugly.

Thorin moved his hands back down so that they could settle comfortably on Bilbo’s hips. He leaned forward to whisper against his lips, “Am I forgiven?”

Bilbo reached up to kiss him lightly, giving a soft hum of approval, before realizing something.

“Wait. Thorin,” he interrupted breathlessly. “I’m worried about the Dwarves.”

The Dwarven king pulled back, looking surprised. “What about the Dwarves?”

“It’s just… lately, they have been acting peculiar.” Well, more peculiar than normal, anyway. “They are spending more and more time in the treasure room, growing increasingly fascinated with all the gold and gems to the point of being constantly distracted.” Bilbo sighed. His eyes were locked on Thorin’s bruised lips and his hands were gently caressing the Dwarf’s waist. He hastily continued before he became too distracted.

“And at this rate, I worry that the wall will never finish on time.”

Thorin brushed his lips along Bilbo's forehead to kiss away the furrow between his brows. "Dwarves naturally feel the pull of treasure more strongly than other races," he began to explain gently, "and a treasure horde as magnificent as King Thror's would no doubt arrest the attention of even the most strong-willed Dwarf. It is nothing too serious to be worried about."

"But if you are concerned about the wall's progress, I will have every member of the company focus on nothing but its completion from now on," the Dwarf offered kindly, and Bilbo felt a great weight was lifted from his shoulders. "Will this please you?"

"Yes, thank you." Bilbo smiled brightly at Thorin before giving him a soft peck on the corner of his lips.

Something about Thorin's explanation continued to nag at Bilbo, but the Hobbit could not tell what it was. He decided to take mental note of it, just in case.

It wasn't until much later that night when everyone was asleep that a sudden memory came to Bilbo.

Gandalf had told him about the tale of Thorin's grandfather, King Thror who was responsible for accumulating the great wealth of Erebor. However, he was notoriously known for his all-consuming, unparalleled obsession for treasure to the point that people dubbed it as –

Gold fever.

The infamous disease to which all Dwarves were naturally susceptible. It began by entering into the minds and hearts of Dwarves, taking root there and *growing* until the Dwarves became slaves to their addiction for gold. They would become blind to everything except fulfilling their constant need to satiate their greed.

If left unchecked, it would always lead to their ruin.

And it seemed that this very same sickness had begun to spread through Thorin's Company like a dark, malevolent, infectious plague.

Nothing to worry about, my foot! Bilbo thought as he felt a deep sense of foreboding.

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23 November, T.A 2491

Bilbo looked up in time to see a section of the barricade by Erebor's front gate come crashing down in a deafening crack, kicking up a large cloud of dust and debris. With a mighty chorus of battle cries that resonated across the valley, Thorin and his Company of Dwarves charged majestically from behind the lowered barricade and into the fray of battle. The Dwarves had all discarded their travel-worn cloaks to replace them with spectacular pieces of glittering Dwarven armour, no doubt salvaged from the treasure horde. Ruthlessly, they cut into any enemy that stood before them with Thorin at the front of the charge, swinging his deadly battle axe in powerful strikes. One by one, wargs and Orcs alike fell to their mighty blows and once their immediate area was cleared, Thorin raised his voice to shout at the army of Men, Dwarves, and Elves to reach for him. Meanwhile, Orcs from above the mountain were continuously pelting rocks at the newcomers to the battle but luckily, Thorin and his company managed to escape unscathed.

At the sight of the King under the Mountain, Bilbo felt a deep pang of pain, sadness, and residual anger. They had not parted on good terms at all but the Hobbit hoped that one day, the Dwarf would understand his reasons for giving the Arkenstone to Bard.

An Orc rider barrelled towards Bilbo, and he leapt away ungracefully, limbs flailing in his panic to get away, only to narrowly avoid being skewered through his middle by a half-buried, broken piece of spear. Right, he could lament all he wanted *after* escaping from this valley of horrible, painful death. Right now, he needed to know where he could go. Bilbo urgently looked around again and he spotted the barricade by the gate. His plan to reach the Southern spur for safety was a bust, but maybe he could run into the mountain instead. With a portion of the barricade down, the front gates could be opened and better yet, everyone else was too preoccupied to have remembered this.

The Hobbit followed the surge of Elves, Dwarves and Men who heeded Thorin's call, and he was sheltered from the worst of the fighting for lingering among the crowd. He reached the narrow neck of the valley with relative ease, but before he could continue forward, he heard battle cries from a pair of familiar voices. He turned around to see who was in trouble and sure enough, he spotted Ori and Bofur being pressed on all sides and valiantly fighting to escape. *They must have separated from the rest of the Dwarves*, Bilbo realized and without any hesitation, the Hobbit raised Sting and charged towards his friends to help. The Dwarves might not like him for what he had done, but he definitely did not return their sentiment.

Bilbo hacked wildly at the legs of Orcs and goblins blocking his path, desperately trying to reach the two Dwarves before they were overwhelmed. His breathing was ragged, and his heart was pounding through his chest but he did not dare

to stop or slow down. The blue glow of his sword was rapidly being smothered under the thick coat of black Orc blood, but Bilbo continued to drive forward relentlessly until he stood behind a spear-wielding goblin who had taken aim at Bofur's unprotected back. Using both his hands, Bilbo swung his sword hard towards the back of the goblin's leg with every intention of distracting his foe by giving him a jagged cut. Instead, he misjudged the force of his blow and to Bilbo's horror and disgust, Sting easily passed through the limb as if it was butter.

The goblin toppled face-first onto the ground from the sudden loss of balance; he shrieked loudly in pain when he realized that he was missing his leg from beneath the knee. Bilbo saw Bofur spin around from the unexpected noise, only to catch sight of the miserable goblin writhing in agony. Surprised, the Dwarf quickly scanned his surroundings, looking more and more confused when he could not find anything to Bilbo's amusement.

Bilbo was deciding if he wanted to make his presence known when a snarling warg pounced in his direction. The Hobbit instinctively dove to the side, landing hard on the ground with his breath knocked from his body. Groaning quietly, the Halfling winced at the feel of his mithril shirt digging painfully into his skin. He was probably going to have some interesting, checkered-like bruises from where he landed on the links of the chain mail. Slowly, he rolled over and forced himself to scramble back to his feet, rubbing against his tender sides the entire time. When Bilbo finally looked up again, he caught just a glimpse of Bofur and Ori retreating further into the east.

That's probably where everyone is, the Hobbit realized. He bolted after them without a thought, dodging the numerous dead on the ground and ducking from the blows that were unwittingly slung at his face by the warriors around him. He swung his blade at the occasional goblins and Orcs who got too close, but he did no more damage than scoring long cuts along any unarmoured flesh.

Bilbo spotted Fíli's bright blond hair just as a large, fearsome Orc managed to connect a blow with his spiked mace against the Dwarf's right shoulder. The powerful attack knocked Fíli off his feet and he was sent flying headfirst to the ground with a loud thud. Bilbo's blood ran cold at the sight of the young Dwarf lying unmoving on the ground and the Hobbit redoubled his effort to push aside the throng of people to reach him. Kíli had already moved to stand in front of the Orc to protect his brother's prone form; the image of such a massive, lumbering opponent facing a fearlessly small one was almost comical but Bilbo, having been in the same situation time and again, could relate. The Hobbit approached the enemy's vulnerable side just in time to see the Orc raising his mace over his head with both hands, prepared to deliver a crushing blow to the Dwarf's skull. Gritting his teeth at the sight and feeling a surge of protectiveness coursing through him, Bilbo unceremoniously stabbed into the Orc's flank, putting his whole weight into the thrust. The sword pierced through the shabby leather armour and sank to the hilt into the monster's body. The Orc froze in mid-position and then, feeling the sharp agony of his wound, flung his mace to the ground to clutch at his side howling. His large, flailing arms hit Bilbo across the face, sending him rolling backwards until he smacked right into a very confused-looking Kíli. The unexpected impact knocked the Dwarf backwards as well and together, they landed in a heap of sprawling limbs on the ground.

Oh, at least I had someone to cushion the fall, Bilbo thought distractedly. His cheek was throbbing in time with his heartbeat and by *Eru*, that was going to *smart*. "Owwwwwww," he groaned rather pitifully.

"Bilbo?!"

Bilbo felt a pair of hands awkwardly groping at his head over his leather helm before trailing down to his upper back and shoulders.

Oh right, he was still invisible. Well, he guessed the cat was out of *that* bag.

"Yes, it's me. I'm right here."

He rolled off the Dwarf, slipped off the ring and hastily pocketed the small golden band away. Kíli was looking at him with wide eyes as if he had, well, appeared out of thin air.

"You can turn invisible?!"

"Uhm. Yes?" Bilbo was grasping at straws to come up with something, *anything*. "It's a…thing. That I do," Bilbo trailed off, lamely.

Judging by Kíli's confounded expression, he did not think the explanation was a good one either.

"A…thing."

"Yes."

"…that you do."

"Look, can we just get on with this?" Bilbo waved a hand at the general vicinity to where Fíli was and Kíli jolted back into action.

They ran over to Fíli and gently rolled him over to his back. He was breathing and there was a thin trail of blood trickling from his shoulder down to his arm, but it was hard to gauge the extent of the damage under the thick metal armour. Bilbo and Kíli lifted the unconscious Dwarf, taking great care not to put any pressure on his shoulder, and moved him under a slab of jutting rocks, away from the thick of battle. It was the safest place they could find on such short notice,

and it would have to do. All the while, the Hobbit could hear Kíli muttering incredulously under his breath: “He can turn invisible?! He can turn invisible! I can’t believe he can turn invisible!”

They deposited the blond Dwarf in the new location and Kíli quickly loosened the clasp to Fíli’s chest piece. Thankfully, the armour had taken the brunt of the damage and aside from a few scratches, there was very little bleeding. The shoulder, however, was dislocated and there was nothing either Fíli or Bilbo could do until after the battle when they could send for a healer.

“Do you know where the rest of the Company is?” Bilbo asked hurriedly as he did his best to make Fíli comfortable.

“Yes, they were where you found us, a little further to the east.” Kíli got up after doing a final check to make sure that his brother was fine for the time being. “I can bring you there.”

They backtracked to the place where they had fought the Orc, only to find it lying dead on the ground with several arrow shafts sticking out from the back of its neck. At the sight of the massive body, Bilbo suddenly realized that he was weaponless and completely vulnerable. The Hobbit had to retract his sword first before he could go anywhere and with that in mind, he yelled at Kíli to go on ahead without him. After all, the Hobbit would have an easier time catching up now that he knew where the Company was. Kíli gave Bilbo a quick nod and pointed to the direction he was going again before swiftly disappearing into the fighting crowd.

Bilbo slowly circled the body until he could see Sting’s hilt protruding from the side. He quickly scampered forward and struggled to liberate his sword, but the hilt was thoroughly coated with blood and his grip kept slipping off every time he tried to pull Sting out. Cursing, he tugged his sleeve over his hand so that he would have a better grip, and using his foot to push against the Orc’s prone body, he wriggled the blade a little before violently wrenching it out. The sword came loose with a wet, disgusting squelch along with a gush of black blood and Bilbo tried not to gag at the overwhelming smell of coppery blood.

Another resounding roar rose from the valley and with a sinking feeling of utter dread, Bilbo looked around to see what new hell has arrived now. To his great surprise, the warriors around him were cheering in victory at the sky, at what seemed like a great flock of mighty birds that were rapidly approaching. The Hobbit continued to stare entranced until he recognized his new allies.

The great Eagles of Manwë had joined the battle.

Bilbo whooped and cheered along with the Elves, Men, and Dwarves, completely elated by the arrival of these majestic, noble-hearted creatures.

He was so busy celebrating that he completely missed the medium-sized boulder arcing steadily towards him until it crashed into the side of his head.

Notes:

A/N: I also refer to this chapter in my head as: “A Domestic, the Onset of Gold Fever, and Shit Just Got Real.”

A BIG thank you to everyone who kudosed, recced, bookmarked, favorited and commented. You guys are seriously awesome and I honestly was not expecting this level of response. I hope that after reading this chapter, you did not regret clicking into this fic again. If you did, then…well…I’m sorry? D:

On to more notes! **Spoilers for the book!

[1] Funny thing; in canon, the reason for Bilbo taking and keeping the Arkenstone wasn’t outright explained. It was insinuated that a) since Bilbo took less than his promised share, he took the stone as part of his deal, b) the Dwarves were being dicks from their mad obsession with the treasure (especially Thorin, who was literally the king of dicks) and thus, c) Bilbo felt he deserved to keep it.

I’m trying to make Bilbo/Thorin work and quite frankly, petty vindictiveness is not a sound basis for any kind of relationship so...I kinda had to dig deep and make something up. *hand waves*

[2] I was debating on the meaning of ‘grocer’ from the line “he looks more like a grocer than a burglar.” So…I consulted the interwebs and found this: “One who buys and sells food in the gross (in large quantities).” In other words, a food merchant. Sure, let’s go with that.

[3] This mad, all-consuming obsession with gold is a problem that really influenced the Dwarves’ personalities from Chapter 12 and onwards. While they are not evil, they are not completely faultless either, and I hope this point came across clearly in this chapter.

[4] The kiss was a last minute add-in. I hope you guys liked it.

[4.5] I deviated from canon regarding the issue about the ring. For the sake of this fic, Bilbo totally did not tell the Dwarves about its existence. (See comments for explanation).

[5] In BOFA, Bilbo was knocked unconscious by a rock to the head. I thought it'd be appropriate if something similar happened. HA!

Please let me know what you guys think! I love reading your comments :)

Chapter 3 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/647133/chapters/1229120)

Notes:

A massive thank you to my Beta, ArielT for her help. :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_3_endnotes) .)

07 December, T.A 2491

There weren't a lot of things in this world that Kíli could say he openly hated. At the top of his head, he could name a few like Orcs, Goblins, Wargs, Thranduil and his band of overly frou-frou Elves…

He was really starting to consider putting healing tents on that list though, especially after having spent the last week constantly flitting in and out of one. He hated the oppressive feeling of depression and silence that lingered heavily in the air, he hated the pungent smell of medicinal salves that clung to his clothes and hair, and he absolutely loathed how… grey and washed out everything was. Come to think of it, it wasn't as if he liked those healing tents all that much to begin with. It always took a lot to convince him to step anywhere near one, including (but not limited to) forcibly dragging him into the premises, kicking and screaming.

"Stop your whinging, Kíli. You're supposed to be helping."

Surprised, Kíli jostled the pan of warm water in his hands, causing some to splash out. He scowled and gave his brother a dirty, dirty look. "I didn't even say anything!"

Fíli, who was used to receiving all manners of insults from his baby brother, was completely undeterred. He coolly stared back with an arched eyebrow. "You're making that face again," he pointed out in a matter-of-fact way. Kíli hated whenever he pulled that big-brother-knows-better act.

"What face? I do not make any faces."

"Yes, you do. It's that same one that Uncle Thorin wears whenever he disapproves of something." He gestured helplessly with his left hand that was still holding a clean piece of wet cloth. "It's that scowly, angry one."

Kíli knew just which face Fíli was talking about, having been at the receiving end of it many times over. That didn't mean he was giving this conversation up without a fight though. "My point still stands! I was not whinging. You can't whinge if you're silent!" he retorted petulantly. Honestly, he wasn't even sure where he was going with this anymore. "I was… contemplating."

Fíli was not impressed and he shot his brother a flat look. "Well either way, if you're going to stand there and be all silent and disgruntled like, at least do it a little closer so that I can reach the water." He turned back towards the cot where Bilbo was resting and missed seeing Kíli roll his eyes at the huffy response.

They were making terrible progress with changing Bilbo's bandages, and it wasn't even because the Hobbit had many to begin with. In the two weeks that Bilbo had spent unconscious in the healing tent, most of his injuries had improved enough that the healers could ease up on the bandages. What made the Dwarves work embarrassingly slow was that Fíli could only use his left hand, since his right arm was wrapped in a sling, and Kíli kept getting distracted by his own thoughts.

Kíli shuffled closer and gently deposited the water pan on the wooden chair beside his brother. Deciding to follow Fíli's lead before he could get any more annoyed with him, the younger Dwarf began to methodically clean around the cuts on their Burglar's arms. Bilbo was making great progress; most of the cuts he had received in battle had sealed shut and were healing without infection. The bruises on his face were also fading and the colour was slowly seeping back into his skin, giving his cheeks a rosier hue. Although he still hasn't woken, the Hobbit's condition has drastically improved from when they had first dragged him away from the battlefield. Kíli shuddered at the memory. Bilbo had looked like he was inches away from death and from the way that Uncle Thorin was acting, the king was also convinced that their burglar would soon depart from Middle-Earth.

"Fíli, Kíli, you both should still be resting."

…And speak of the devil. How was it that whenever Kíli thought about his uncle, he would appear behind him like… a summoned demon? It must be some sort of eerie, unspoken, supernatural power that all guardian figures possess. His mother was proof enough of that.

Uncle Thorin strode confidently into the tent in his usual, majestic manner, the bottom of his fur surcoat sweeping dramatically behind him.

Someday, after Erebor has been cleaned up, Kíli will *purchase* a furry overcoat and *practice* walking around in it in front of a mirror so that he too could look appropriately majestic. Apparently, Fíli was thinking about the exact same thing judging from his quirked eyebrow.

Kíli smirked. Great minds think alike.

"Uncle," Fíli greeted pleasantly, "Kíli and I are perfectly fine. We can barely even feel our injuries anymore." He wiggled his bound right shoulder as proof. "See?"

"Yeah, what Fíli said. We're feeling right as rain." Kíli grinned and gave his chest a light pat over the large diagonal cut he had received in battle. Their uncle looked visibly relieved at his nephews' good spirits and turned his attention to the Hobbit instead.

"And how is our Bilbo doing today?"

"He is looking much better! The fever is gone, the cuts and bruises are healing more each day, and he's breathing easily," Fíli replied brightly just as he finished applying a fresh layer of Óin's special salves on the cut above the Hafling's right brow.

Kíli helpfully moved the pan of water onto the crowded table so that his uncle could take his usual seat. He watched, amused, as Uncle Thorin gently grasped Bilbo's uninjured left hand between both his palms in what was obviously a practiced move. Kíli wondered if his uncle realized just how acclimated he had become to the Hobbit's presence and how blatantly open he was in showing his affections towards Bilbo.

If Bilbo had died, Kíli was quite certain it would have broken their uncle. The young Dwarf frowned at the depressing image and hoped he would never have to see something so horrible.

Especially since the issue with the Arkenstone hasn't really been resolved. Their uncle would spend the rest of his days with this hanging from the back of his mind. Speaking of which…

"Uncle, where's the Arkenstone?"

Fíli whipped his head up and glared disapprovingly at Kíli with such heated intensity that it made the brunet Dwarf cringed. Whenever the Heart of the Mountain was mentioned, it would always bring out the Dwarven king's melancholy and as a result, there was an unspoken agreement between the Company members. They should avoid the subject if possible and if it was not possible, they should, at the very least, be *very* delicate when breeching the topic.

Kíli had essentially approached it with as much finesse as taking a sledgehammer to a door.

Oops.

Fortunately, Thorin only looked pensive at the question. "I have given it to Bilbo. For the time being, Balin has kept it safe in one of the Royal Vaults."

There was a brief moment of silence.

"Can you… do that?"

One of these days, he would learn how to phrase things delicately, Kíli thought vaguely to himself. Hopefully, it would happen sometime in the *very* near future or else Fíli might die prematurely from a heart attack. He was gesturing rather violently at the younger dwarf to *stop, stop asking for the love Mahal* and if his face wasn't turning such an alarming shade of red, Kíli would have found it quite hilarious.

Thorin, having apparently missed the blond Dwarf's sad attempt at damage control, looked at his younger nephew in mild amusement. "Yes Kíli, it is within my power to do that. After all, Bilbo wished to keep it as part of his share of the treasure." The Dwarven king lowered his head to look at the Hobbit's fingers interlaced with his own and… oh, there's that look of melancholy again.

"There are some things that are worth more than any gold, silver or precious gems in Middle-Earth, even the Arkenstone," Thorin said heavily.

Sensing the sudden shift in the mood of the room, Kíli motioned desperately to his older brother so that he could *do something, anything* to change the topic. He definitely was not going to risk putting that other foot in his mouth. Fíli blurted out instead, "Isn't Gandalf supposed to be due back from Lord Elrond soon?"

Both Dwarves winced. That may not have been the wisest choice of words either.

Thorin's expression promptly darkened. "That Wizard has always done as he pleases. One can only hope that he has not forgotten us."

It has been over ten days since Gandalf had gone to Rivendell on the back of a great Eagle. Kíli was still recovering from his wounds at the time but from what the others had told him, the Wizard and his uncle had shouted at each other

before he left to seek Lord Elrond. The Dwarves had assumed that it was a fight over which treatment to use on Bilbo, but none were courageous enough to ask Thorin. Whatever the argument had been about, Gandalf had temporarily taken leave and the Dwarven king furiously tried all available options ranging from Dwarven to Elven healing techniques.

So far, none of them had proven successful at rousing Bilbo from his unnatural sleep. Kíli could understand why his uncle was feeling testy; he would be too if his last hope was dependent on the combined efforts of a wayward Wizard and an Elf. A wayward Wizard who was a bit *too* fond of his funny pipe-weed.

Another stretch of silence passed.

Kíli and Fíli ducked their heads and worked much faster at applying fresh salves to Bilbo. It was a better alternative than continuing the current thread of conversation. Once the last strip of gauze has been reapplied, the two brothers gathered all the used, dirty items in the water pan and cleaned up whatever mess they had made. Kíli turned to Thorin to bid him good evening but his cheery words died in his throat at the sight of his uncle. For once in his life, the figure sitting beside Bilbo was not the proud, stern uncle that he had known since birth. The Dwarf hunched over uncomfortably on the chair was a grieving man laden with much sadness, bitterness, and so much regret. It disturbed the young Dwarf to his core to see his father figure look so *weary*.

Well, Kíli wouldn't be much of a Dwarf if he just stood there and did nothing.

"Cheer up, Uncle," he said with all the false cheer he could muster. "If Bilbo could do something as impossible like turning *invisible*, surely he could do something much more probable like recovering from his wounds."

"You moron," Fíli punched his brother on the shoulder and *ow, that hurt*! "He's invisible, not invincible!" Realizing what he had implied, the older brother quickly backtracked. "That's…er…not to say that Bilbo will not recover. He's doing so well already and he's getting stronger each day!"

"You weren't there to see him appear out of thin air, so your judgement is moot," Kíli retorted mulishly, refusing to let go of what his brother had said. He rubbed at his aching shoulder and felt a bit peeved at Fíli. "I asked him about it and you know what he told me? He said that it was a thing he did. A *thing*! Who's to say that Bilbo Baggins won't have any other special, secretive powers like invincibility? Or immortality?"

"You're entirely right, brother," Fíli sniffed. "I have not seen Master Baggins appear out of thin air like you claimed and until then, I will take what you have to say with a pinch of salt."

"Oi, who're you calling a liar?" Kíli exploded with indignant fury, "I wasn't the one who lied to Mum about breaking her dishes, or filching that last cookie from the cookie jar, or…or punching Náli in the nose!"

"Náli was an ugly git who deserved more than a punch in the nose!" Fíli cried out, entirely justified by his own reasoning. "Besides, you were thinking about punching him too! He just *happened* to trip and his face *happened* to land on my fist instead!"

"How?" Kíli spluttered. "How can anyone's face conveniently land on someone else's fist? How do the mechanics even *work* in that situation? That sounds suspiciously like a rather unfortunate accident."

"Yeah well, *he*'s an unfortunate accident and his face is one waiting to happen."

A deep, quiet laughter interrupted the two brothers and they turned in time to see Thorin press his fist against his mouth to smother his chuckling. His shaking shoulders were a bit of a dead giveaway though. Surprised by this complete turn of events, Fíli and Kíli could only stare in awe.

"Boys, that's quite enough now," Thorin rasped out audibly enough, struggling to keep a straight face. "If you're done, can you send for Óin? I have much to discuss with him."

At his nephews' awestruck, silent nods, the Dwarven king thanked them with a level of sincerity that Kíli was surprised to hear. Whether he meant to thank them for fetching Oín or for other things, the younger Dwarf was not certain. What both brothers *did* know was that for the first time since the quest, their uncle looked visibly relaxed and, dare they say, happy.

When Fíli and Kíli finally left the tent, it was with lighter spirits and with a sense of accomplishment.

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23 November, T.A 2491

Bilbo woke up with his face mashed against the dirt to the sensation of stabbing, blinding *pain* in his head. He promptly wished that he could just roll over and *die* just to make it stop.

Oh Valar, what just happened?

The Hobbit gingerly pulled himself to a sitting position, fighting the urge to heave from his roiling stomach. Disoriented, he groggily stared at the dark blurring figures around him that were swimming dangerously in and out of focus. He automatically squinted to make out the details and immediately regretted this decision when he felt a sudden,

sharp ache lancing through his temples. The violent bout of nausea came back with a vengeance; Bilbo barely had enough time to bend down before he retched miserably on the ground beside him.

Alright, that was a mistake. Let us never do that again.

The Hobbit groaned wretchedly as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The last time he felt this sick was after he had spent all night celebrating his cousin's fortieth birthday. He had deeply, *deeply* regretted that decision the next morning.

Slowly, *very slowly*, Bilbo painstakingly crawled to the nearest rock and propped himself upright. He shut his eyes in relief and forced himself to take deep, even breaths through his mouth. Little by little, he felt his stomach settle (*thank the Valar!)* at the same time that his awareness came rushing back to him. The Halfling remembered being pushed into the valley, recklessly putting Sting to use against Orcs and Goblins (*seriously, what was he thinking?!*), wildly celebrating the arrival of the Eagles, and then…*oh.*

He carefully reached out to touch the side of his head where the hot, pulsating pain was radiating from, expecting his fingers to come away with blood. To his surprise, the Hobbit felt a large dent in the smooth leather of his helmet. It was pure luck that the helm was built well enough to keep him alive. He could not think of a more *humiliating* death otherwise: Bilbo Baggins, killed from a blow to the head because he was *too stupid* to look up. Just *imagine* all the jokes the Dwarves would have made at his expense…

At the sobering thought of his Dwarven companions, the Hobbit was urgently reminded that Kíli was waiting for him and he *absolutely needed to move. Right. Now.*

The Hobbit gritted his teeth and used every ounce of his will power to push away all the aches and pain he was feeling. He managed to stumble clumsily to his feet after multiple failed attempts and as he stood there, wavering unsteadily on his feet like a newborn fawn, Bilbo noticed, belatedly, that he was empty-handed. The Halfling looked around briefly in panic, winced at the painful stiffness that flared from his neck at the motion, and breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted the familiar blue glow of his sword not too far away. Beads of sweat were collecting against his brow and Bilbo raised a hand to wipe his forehead when he felt a droplet land above his right eye. Glancing down, he saw a vibrant patch of his own blood staining his fingers.

Huh. So maybe he did not escape from that blow as unscathed as he had originally thought.

As the Hobbit grabbed the discarded sword, he mindlessly prodded above his right brow. He scowled when he felt the wounded area sting in response.

I must have gotten cut when I fell, Bilbo concluded, distracted by a new wave of dizziness that washed over him. These new injuries were proving to be major hindrances that he *could not afford*. To make matters worse, the edge of his helm was now digging painfully against the cut, causing fresh blood to dribble unpleasantly along his face. The Hobbit removed the dented armour from his head and dumped it unceremoniously on the ground in a fit of frustration. He savoured the flash of childish vindictiveness from his action. There, that should stop the cut from being further aggravated.

One problem solved, many more to go.

The world around him was quickly devolving into a disturbing, swirling mess of muffled sounds and colours but Bilbo steadfastly ignored this to the best of his ability. Like a man possessed, he pushed onwards, counting his steps – *left foot, right foot, left foot* – taking great care to avoid tripping over the numerous dead that lay on the field or slipping on the blood-slicked earth. The Hobbit was dimly aware that despite his best efforts, his focus was slipping alarmingly and his thoughts were beginning to tangle together in disarray. His mind kept replaying his Dwarven friends' expressions – *shock, hurt, anger* – when they found out that he had willingly given Bard the Arkenstone. Bilbo had never *hated* himself so much at that moment for making Thorin look so – *betrayed and so unspeakably heartbroken, like Bilbo had reached into his heart and crushed it* – and he wished desperately that there had been another option to stop the war. He would have done whatever it took if it meant never seeing Thorin like that – *eyes hardened quickly to cover up any vulnerability he had let slip. His expression was tightly guarded like he should have known that it was too good to be true to have finally found some semblance of happiness. Bilbo hadn't seen that look on Thorin's face since he first stepped foot in Bag End. It hurt his heart.*

It seemed like he had been given a second chance to make amends by helping his friends on the battlefield and Bilbo would be a fool not to take it. He just wished he wouldn't be arriving too late.

The pressing feeling of urgency was fueling him to keep going east – *away, away from home, from the Shire* – where the Company was fighting. He had no idea how long he had been walking, he just knew that he needed to get to – *Thorin, who was so warm when he kissed him on that balcony. Thorin, who loved him despite how useless he was in the wilderness. Thorin, who looked at him with so much wonder and devotion, like he was the most important person on Middle-Earth, when he really wasn't anyone important. Bilbo was not the one who carried the hope of his people in reclaiming their homes, their dignity, their lives. Bilbo wasn't the one who started this whole mess of a quest while being*

aware that their success depended on getting rid of a dragon, of all things. It was Thorin who was stupidly brave. Thorin, whose quiet presence could inspire such loyalty among his people. Thorin, who deserved to be loved, to have a home.

And Bilbo would do *anything* just so that Thorin could smile as freely as he did that time they watched the sun set on Erebor from the balconies.

The Hobbit haphazardly wiped at the blood that was running down his face in mild disgust. *I must look quite the sight,* he thought fuzzily, grimacing at the throbbing pain from his head and from the cut. *I'm covered in dirt and blood, reeking of sick and staggering about the battle field like a drunk. It is the mark of a true warrior.*

The bouts of dizziness were coming more frequently and Bilbo caught himself before he lost his balance. He struggled to find his focus amidst his jumbling thoughts and the spreading headache, but it was getting more difficult with every step. At the sight of a large group of Dwarven soldiers heading determinately towards the south, the Halfling's shoulders sagged in relief. *The Company must be near the head of the crowd,* Bilbo thought hopefully. He hefted his sword up in shaking hands and made to follow.

Sure enough, Thorin Oakenshield was at the front of the charge, face twisted in a snarl while locked in a ruthless three-way battle between two Orcs: one who wielded an impressive looking scimitar and the other who was, oddly enough, pale-skinned like Azog and wielding a mace. Although the Dwarf was agile, Bilbo could see that he was obviously outmanoeuvred in the face of a two-frontal assault. Whenever Thorin blocked a blow from one Orc, the other would quickly attempt to take a swing at the Dwarven king. This barrage of non-stop attacks did not leave any time for Thorin to do much except to react on pure instinct. However, Bilbo knew that it was not in the Dwarf's stubborn nature to be cowed into taking a defensive stance. He watched dazedly as Thorin took every opportunity available to mount aggressive counterattacks with broad, sweeping swings of his own axe, fighting in reckless abandon. *A bit too reckless*, Bilbo wondered suspiciously, trying to put his finger on why something felt…off.

Realization finally hit the Hobbit and he felt his heart drop. Thorin was fighting like he had nothing to lose…as if he *did not care* whether or not he survived.

Fury unlike anything Bilbo had ever felt bubbled through him hotly; it brushed away the creeping effects of numbness and it sharpened his dulled senses to his chaotic surroundings. Didn't Thorin realize that he was so much more important – *to his people, to the Company, to Bilbo* – than to be recklessly sacrificed in battle like that? How could he not *see* that? And to think, Bilbo went through *hell* to protect Thorin, including that whole cursed business with the Arkenstone, only to have that *thrice-cursed* Dwarf willingly *off* himself in a fight!

The larger Orc took a swing of his scimitar to cleave the Dwarven king's head in two, but Thorin was ready for this. He quickly brought his shield overhead while he slashed at the Orc's exposed legs. His attacker let loose a howl of outrage and agony as he buckled to the ground with bleeding, torn knees. Using the momentum of his previous swing, Thorin brought his axe downward and beheaded his fallen foe in one elegant, fluid motion. This victory was short lived, however. The Dwarf was not fast enough to evade the pale Orc's mace to his chest and he was sent skidding harshly along the dirt floor. Visibly winded and face screwed in pain, Thorin had enough strength to raise one shaking hand to wrap around his aching ribs. He struggled to get back on his feet but he had obviously been too weakened. The pale Orc grinned in malice, smug in the knowledge that he had bested the Dwarven king, and without taking his eyes off Thorin, he slowly went to pick up his fallen ally's scimitar. He muttered something in his harsh, guttural sounding language and he raised his arm over his head to bring down a killing strike. Bilbo saw resignation in Thorin's eyes and –

No.

Before he could register what he did, Bilbo had launched himself from the sideline to boldly position in front of the Dwarven king. The Hobbit was right under the oncoming scimitar.

It will be a cold day in hell before Bilbo was willing to watch the Dwarf die for the sake of battle honour.

He flung Sting out in a desperate attempt to parry.

Because if Thorin himself could not see how important he was, then it was up to Bilbo to do his damnedest in keeping that idiot, self-sacrificing Dwarven king alive.

Bilbo heard a sickening wet snap as the blades connected, followed by the sensation of unbelievable, fiery *pain* licking along the length of his right arm. Distantly, the Hobbit heard someone let out a choked scream.

Timing is everything. Deflect the oncoming blow with the flat side of your blade, not the edge. Bilbo, are you paying attention? This is important.

Yes, Thorin. I'm all ears.

He realized belatedly that the scream came from him.

When faced with downward cuts, intercept with a horizontal sideways blow. Given your stature, you should practice this the most.

...I'll have you know that I have a perfectly respectable size for a Hobbit!

The Orc's eyes widened when his scimitar was knocked off course but Bilbo did not care. He was too busy fighting to breathe through the *agony* that flooded into every part of his body, lighting all of his nerves on *fire,* making him *burn* from the inside. Gasping desperately, the Hobbit paled to a sickly shade of white. He did not think he could draw enough air into his lungs to scream a second time. The combined pain from all of his injuries threatened to overwhelm him and Bilbo stubbornly locked his knees to remain standing. Dimly, he registered that he had let his sword slip from his grasp and that his left hand was cradling his injured right wrist. He wished he could remember when that had happened though.

Above all else, Bilbo - never, under any circumstance, let go of your sword.

Bilbo choked down a mad, hysterical laugh that threatened to claw its way out of his throat, but he didn't think he succeeded very well from the Orc's bewildered look. The Orc was rapidly coming in and out of focus and all the noise around Bilbo has been reduced to a dull roar. It was taking everything in the Hobbit to hold his position.

Use these lessons only as a last resort, Bilbo. Your first priority is to run.

The Halfling could do nothing else but to keep breathing as his foe's expression unexpectedly turned to horror. An abnormally large, angry bear – *it's Beorn the shapeshifter* – was lumbering towards the Orc and with one mighty lunge, the Orc was pinned beneath the great beast's weight. The whole fight has taken on a surreal quality, and Bilbo wasn't even sure if what he was seeing was real anymore. He was too busy holding on to that last thread of coherency even when his vision was greying at the side. The burning pain he had felt has now concentrated in his head and neck, bringing back the intense sensation of nausea. Bilbo grimaced and he could feel his skin pull from the dried, caked blood along the right side of his face.

The Hobbit thought he heard his name being called. He was jolted out of his haze at the soft touch of his shoulder, only to realize that he was looking up into Thorin's blue eyes.

Huh, how did he get here?

Thorin was speaking to him.

Thorin is safe, Thorin is safe, Thorin is safe.

Bilbo could see his lips moving slowly at first, then more frantically but he could not hear what he had to say. Black spots had started to appear in his vision and Bilbo tried to blink them away with no success. He supposed he should be a bit more worried about himself, but the sense of relief from seeing Thorin alive was so overpowering, he could not help but smile softly at the Dwarf. He had wished so desperately, with every fibre in his body, that Thorin would be safe since the beginning of the battle.

Please be safe, by the Valar, please let him be safe.

And there he was, standing in front of him with that stupidly endearing brow furrow of his, lips moving again and again to get Bilbo to understand his words. The Hobbit wondered what made him look so panicked.

Thorin is safe, everyone should be fine, everything should be fine. Thorin is safe.

Bilbo really wished he could understand what the Dwarf was saying though. He always liked hearing Thorin's voice. At the very least, he wished he could apologize to Thorin but he just felt so *tired* from all the fighting. The fiery pain has finally burned itself out, only to give way to a tingling numbness that was spreading through his veins, travelling across his chest and into his limbs. Everything felt so blessedly cold and Bilbo felt like he could just float away to sleep for a long, long time. Thorin wouldn't mind, would he?

Thorin is safe. It's okay to let go now.

With that last thought swimming around in his head, Bilbo's vision tilted and darkness rushed in rapidly to meet him.

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24 November, T.A 2491

Songs of mourning in the languages of Men, Elves and Dwarves intertwined with each other and rose in cadence, their haunting melodies flitting across the darkened valley and rolling into the torch-lit army camps at the base of Erebor. Although the battle was won through the combined efforts of many different races, there were no celebrations, not in the wake of such wanton destruction and overwhelming loss. Past grievances between the kingdoms were swept aside to accomplish the unspoken common goal of recovering the injured. For once in centuries, aid was freely and willingly given between the Dwarves and Mirkwood Elves without grumbling. Everyone was much too busy licking their wounds to remember that they were supposed to hate each other.

Tomorrow, they would continue the arduous task of clearing the fields of the numerous dead. Tonight, all those who were left standing would tend to the wounded and grieve for the ones who could not be saved. It would continue to serve as a stark reminder of the cost of war.

Thorin knew that he should be out there among his people. He had a duty to act in a way befitting a leader to guide his kin through these dark days, but he could not make himself get up from this chair. Beside him, Bilbo slept in his cot; he was deathly pale, swathed in thick bandages and breathing raggedly. The bits of skin that were left uncovered were coated in a light sheen of sweat, and once in a while, the Hobbit would shiver so violently that Thorin's fingers itched to find yet another blanket to cover the Hobbit. The healers had done all they could to treat his wounds given how thin their supplies were stretched. Until the next day when they receive more aid, there was nothing more they could do for Bilbo except to keep his strength up with sips of water and light broth.

The same flock of healers had descended on the Dwarven king, wrapping his injured middle with layers upon layers of gauze. Fortune had smiled upon Thorin, and he had managed to escape from the battle with his life. If Bilbo had not intervened…

In the dimly lit healer tent, surrounded by the echoing songs of his people, Thorin dropped his proud posture and buried his face in his hands. He had not rest since he had carried the broken, bleeding body of his Hobbit from the battle ground to the nearest healer that he could find. How could he? All he could see in his mind was Bilbo, with blood covering half of his face, staring so brokenly at him that Thorin was afraid of shattering him with just one touch. And then, the Hobbit had the audacity to *smile* so sweetly at him. Bilbo had looked so *relieved* when he registered the king's presence, even when he was half delirious from pain and Thorin… Thorin did not *understand* what any of this meant.

It felt like the ground was taken from right under Thorin and he was left scrambling to make sense of his world again. The Dwarf had thought he had a clear understanding of the relationship between himself and Bilbo Baggins. He had made his intentions to court the burglar clear, and when the Hobbit had returned his affections, he was elated at having found the right person by his side. The Dwarf had long since made peace with the probability of dying unmarried and unloved when he had sworn to reclaim his people's lost home. After all, who would willingly tie themselves to an uncertain future with a bitter, lost Dwarf on a suicidal mission? Then, he had met the most kind, clever, *infuriating* creature and Thorin had *wanted* him, wanted to spend the rest of forever with him, with a kind of hungry fervor that took his breath away.

That very same Hobbit had openly admitted to concealing the Arkenstone from the Company before giving it to the enemy, not even a month into their courtship. That very same Hobbit had stood in the battlefield between Thorin and a killing blow when he was already suffering from an injury, and then had *dared* to laugh madly in the face of his foe. That very same Hobbit had looked at him with such painfully naked, undisguised love before succumbing to his wounds. The Dwarf was at a complete lost to what he should do next.

"Damn you, Bilbo Baggins. Just look how wretched I have become," Thorin whispered harshly, his voice broken and bitter. He had every right to be angry at the Halfling. He had every right to demand that Bilbo never return to his side or Erebor again. Bilbo was in the wrong. Bilbo betrayed him. Bilbo saved him. Bilbo loved him. Why did his heart hurt so much and why couldn't he look away and walk out of the tent?

"I cannot say I am surprised to find you here, Thorin, not even after the words you spoke at the gate."

Despite his appearance of a wizened old man, Gandalf the Grey was surprisingly light on his feet. Thorin lifted his head enough to glare wickedly at the Wizard, hiding his surprise at seeing Gandalf's arm in a sling. "What do you want, Wizard?"

"I am here to visit my friends," Gandalf said kindly at Thorin's incredulous scoff. "Yes, both of them, even though one will not acknowledge my friendship and the other cannot. It does not make the reason behind my visit any less sincere."

Thorin would not have any of the Wizard's flowery words. "What would you know about sincerity and honesty?" the Dwarven king snarled, "Both of you conspired against me to steal the Arkenstone!"

Gandalf's eyes flashed as he rose menacingly to his full height. "Bilbo Baggins was brave enough to seek resolution between your Company and the Lake-town Men!" His voice rumbled and his shadow filled every part of the tent. "He gave his share of his treasure so that it could be traded for gold! Gold that will be used for reparations from Smaug's destruction." Gandalf took a step closer to the frozen, speechless king. "Gold that originally came from Dale in the first place!" He took yet another step closer and Thorin could feel his mouth dry. "Gold that was not yours to keep! Perhaps you should dwell on this, Thorin Oakenshield, before you are so quick to vilify him for his actions!"

"He concealed the Arkenstone from me!" Thorin roared back, feeling betrayed all over again and *refusing* to back down, not when he was the injured party. "He deliberately *lied* to me even after I told him about the gem's importance and after he had accepted my affections!" That, above all else, had hurt the Dwarven king the most. Had the Hobbit lied about returning his interest and was Thorin being callously tricked into complacency as well?

Gandalf must have understood the king's unspoken words for his expression softened immediately. He hunched back into himself, taking a more relaxed posture. "I cannot say why he chose to do that," the Wizard tiredly admitted. "But I wonder, what finally drove him to such desperate levels that he would risk your wrath and go directly to the Men and Elves

himself? He has been nothing but loyal towards you and the Company." Gandalf gave a quick sidelong glance at Bilbo's prone and injured form. "Judging from his current state, his loyalty towards you hasn't ebbed in the slightest."

The Wizard was right, Thorin thought, his temper quelling at the reminder that Bilbo had chosen to protect him. The gentle Hobbit was not cruel. He must have had a very good reason for doing what he did. "He never offered any explanations." The Dwarf frowned. He raised a hand to rub his temples. "I don't understand."

They spent a few minutes in silence but both Wizard and Dwarf were too preoccupied by their own thoughts to give it any mind. Outside, the chanting voices of mourners grew softer.

"What would have happened if Bilbo had not intervened?" Gandalf asked, in a tone that suggested he already knew the answer. The Dwarven king shifted in his chair and waited silently for the Wizard to answer for him.

"War, Thorin Oakenshield, war that would have risked the lives of those remaining few of Durin's folk." Thorin winced at Gandalf's bleak resignation, as if no other outcome was possible. Gandalf ignored the Dwarf and continued his line of questioning.

"What do Hobbits value, Thorin?"

That was a good question. "A warm hearth, good food, and a well-tended garden?" The Dwarven king answered hesitantly. He wasn't sure where the Wizard was going with this.

Gandalf chuckled at the answer. "All very true," he admitted, "but none of these could be obtained without peace. The Hobbits are gentle people who actively avoid battles."

Thorin leaned back in his chair and scratched his forehead with his thumb. "So you are saying that he was driven to act on his Hobbit sensibilities?" the Dwarf ventured slowly and in disbelief, looking at the Wizard for signs of confirmation.

The Wizard stroked his long, grey beard. "It has to do with more than that. Bilbo abhorred battles so he would naturally choose the option with no bloodshed." Gandalf hummed under his breath. "However, we can all safely assume that our burglar wishes for you and the Company to remain safe above all else." He looked expectantly at the Dwarven king with one brow raised. "Do you understand now? He was ultimately acting in what he believed to be in your best interest."

Thorin felt his heart sank. "But why couldn't he have just told me all this?" The expression on his face was pained and he looked towards the cot. Bilbo had not stirred at all during this conversation.

"Didn't he?"

A distant memory of an argument in the treasure room came to mind. The Hobbit had gotten so uncharacteristically angry at Thorin before storming off to the balconies. How could the Dwarf have forgotten something so unusual? He clenched his fists tightly over his knees as realization hit. "He… tried. I did not listen."

Bilbo had looked so worried when the king had referred to the Lake-town Men as thieves, but the Dwarf was resolute in his decision to ignore the Men's grievances. This had led to a tense standoff between the Dwarves, the Men, and the Elves at the base of the mountain, days before the battle, while Thorin was happily protected behind the barricades in Erebor. If the goblins had not arrived, they would have fought amongst themselves instead of joining forces against a common foe.

Gandalf was right; it would have led to a war and it would not have been worth it.

Bilbo knew and he tried to stop the fight.

What did it matter at the end? A battle still broke out and Bilbo chose to pay the price for Thorin's safety yet again.

It was not worth it, it was not worth it, it was not worth it.

The Hobbit shivered violently and the Dwarfquickly leaned over to check on him. His head wounds had not closed and the bandages wrapped around them were slowly getting soaked through with blood, to Thorin's horror. The Dwarven king gently ran a soothing hand over Bilbo's hair in a rhythmic motion, making low shushing noises to calm the Halfling. What seemed like an eternity later, the Hobbit lay silent save for his raspy breathing.

Thorin's eyes were bright when he finally turned around to look at Gandalf. "Please, if there is anything you can do for him." He swallowed thickly, voice heavy with emotion.

Gandalf, who had watched the proceeding in solemn silence, shook his head sadly. "His injuries require healing skills beyond the ones I possess. Our best chance would be with Lord Elrond."

The Dwarf's tired eyes widened in shock and dismay. "He cannot travel, not in this condition!"

"Then I shall go to Rivendell in haste and seek his counsel." With his mind made up, Gandalf did not wait for further instructions before straightening his robes. He gave a short, curt nod to the king. "Please keep me informed of his condition during my travel."

The Wizard was out of the tent before Thorin could reply.

Notes:

A/N: This chapter…was the bane of my existence. I managed to fit all that I had originally planned in there, and then I added some more to it when I realized that there were holes to fill. It was a painful, messy experience and I had to rewrite parts of it so many times, I literally have just about given up on it. The end result is a lonnnnggg chapter. Hope you guys enjoyed this way more than I did writing it.

At least now, we have the full story to what happened to Bilbo. Also, nobody dies! Hurray!

Hang on everyone, we're one chapter away from the end! Again, thank you for all the kudos, reviews, recs, alerts, subscriptions and favorites! Please comment/review as always. I love to hear from you!

**Notes about this chapter [Warning, may contain book spoilers!]

[1] During BOFA, Bilbo was knocked unconscious by a rock that was lobbed at him from one of them Goblins. I changed it up so that Bilbo will receive a traumatic head injury instead. I researched whatever I could and essentially handwaved a lot of stuff. Sorry, I am not a medical professional. :P

[2] Although Thorin's charge into the battle was brave and honourable, it was also crazy reckless especially since he just went in there, guns blazing like he was mother-effing Rambo.

Bad things tend to happen to people who do stuff like that, bad things like death. Just saying.

[3] Gandalf really did get injured enough to warrant a sling, though Tolkien never really specified which arm was injured. I kinda just rolled with that ambiguity. Heh.

Chapter 4 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/647133/chapters/1260769)

Notes:

Unbeta-ed for now. Wanted to get this out since I feel bad for releasing this so late. D:

This is it! The last chapter! Hope you guys will enjoy it and thanks for letting me play in your sandbox. Comments are love and spank that kudos button like you mean it. >:D

[EDIT: Betaed by ArielT. Thank you so much! Also, I just got a tumblr account. Feel free to drop by if you have questions and/or comments: bgtea.tumblr.com]

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_4_endnotes) .)

11 December, T.A 2491

Thorin wished that they had relocated Bilbo to a bigger tent. From his usual, rickety, wooden seat beside Bilbo's cot, he watched amusedly as Bombur and Bofur waded their way through the over-crowded area, each holding a platter filled with assorted food. They plonked them on a sad spindly table amidst the Dwarves' loud cheering before grabbing handfuls of cheese, potato bits, and meat from both hands and tossing these to their hungry neighbours with great gusto. The Dwarves made a mad grab at the flying food with enthusiastic glee, roaring in laughter whenever one of them made a spectacular catch. Everyone was so engrossed in getting fed that nobody saw Bombur accidentally tumbling backwards and jostling a nearby support strut. The sudden, ominous shaking of the tent's canvas abruptly killed the noise in the room. All of the Dwarves looked around in frozen anticipation.

The tent wobbled a few more times and then stood still again. The Dwarves cheered and went back to their food.

Honestly, at the very least Thorin should have moved the Hobbit some place with the structural integrity to withstand the combined destructive forces of thirteen Dwarves. He regretted not having thought of that earlier.

"Watch out, everyone! Let Gandalf through!"

Make that thirteen Dwarves and one Wizard.

May Mahal have mercy on them all.

Maybe Erebor's war room? That should be sturdy enough, Thorin thought wryly.

Gandalf appeared as abruptly as he had left, as Wizards tend to do, on horseback wearing a new Elven-made sling and carrying a satchel filled with Lord Elrond's specially concocted medicine. His triumphant return was a sight for sore eyes and roused a mighty cheer among the Dwarves, Men, and Elves who were sympathetic towards Bilbo's plight. In the

weeks after the great battle, stories of the Hobbit's heroic deeds had spread like wildfire among the different camps with each retelling getting more and more fantastical. The version that Thorin overheard from a group of Dain's soldiers featured Bilbo swinging dramatically from the ceiling and, according to the soldier, "punched the dragon right in his ugly, scaly, fire-breathing face. Hooyah!"

He valiantly tried not to laugh at that mental image.

Either way, the damage was done. Outpourings of sympathies and well-wishes came from every direction. This had not bothered Thorin all that much until the gifts started to make its way into the healing tent.

Piles and never ending piles of them. Piles that stacked up from floor to ceiling.

By the week's end, there was such a large accumulation of gifts that the Dwarven king had to employ Ori, who possessed exceptional organizational skills, to keep everything neatly stored away. The last thing Thorin wanted was for one of the haphazard piles of presents to topple over and smother Bilbo in his sleep.

He grimaced at the thought. The Hobbit would not appreciate the irony of death from get-well presents.

Gandalf slowly shimmied his way to Bilbo's cot with a lot more grace than his Dwarven companions. Following close were Kíli and Fíli, who struggled with the water pan, fresh bandages, and Elrond's potions they were carrying. Thorin pushed his chair back to make space for the three, moving out of the way when his nephews placed the heavy load in their arms on the nearby table. The Dwarf found himself half leaning on the bed, so close to the Hobbit that Thorin could hear every soft exhale of breath from Bilbo's slow and steady breathing. The king automatically brushed a hand lightly along his burglar's temple and cheek, his fingertips soaking up the warmth from where he touched his Bilbo. He hoped Gandalf would provide some good news.

"What did Lord Elrond say about Bilbo's condition?" Thorin asked once Gandalf made himself suitably comfortable. Judging from Gandalf's look of disapproval and the tell-tale twitch of his moustache, he had not been able to hide his distaste for the Elf in his voice.

The Dwarven king leaned against his chair, lifted his brow, and stared back in return. The Wizard would just have to deal with his dislike.

"Lord Elrond has generously brewed a month's worth of medicine to be administered once daily for our Bilbo." Gandalf waved a hand for Kíli to pluck out three different coloured potions from the side table among everything else that was brought in. "Two drops of the yellow potion, one drop of the blue, and one drop of the red. They are to be mixed together with a spoonful of water or broth before feeding it to him." The Wizard paused, stroking his beard slowly. "He has sent some of his healers over to Erebor, but it will take a few more weeks before they arrive."

Gandalf shot a pointed look at the rowdy group of Dwarves clustered tightly behind him. "Lord Elrond also suggested that in the meantime, we should give the Hobbit plenty of rest, preferably somewhere nice and quiet." He tilted his head to look knowingly at the group. "Somewhere without disturbances."

Everyone started to object. Loudly.

"We're here to provide support for Master Bilbo!" Ori cried out passionately in his thin, reedy voice before he was drowned out by a chorus of approval.

"We're also here for the food!" Nori garbled with his mouth full of potatoes from somewhere within the Dwarf pile, earning him a round of laughter and praise.

"I'm here to see what's so great about that ruddy Elf's medicine." Óin grouched bitterly from his corner beside his brother Glóin. Really, what could the Elves do that his ointment couldn't?

"Alright, alright, that's enough!" Thorin called over the noise and unexpectedly, everyone settled down quickly without further damaging the tent. He paused, slightly taken aback (and automatically suspicious) by the docile behaviour, then shook his head dismissively. There were more important issues that needed his attention at the moment, issues like Elrond's dodgy potions for example.

Turning to the amused looking Wizard, Thorin asked apprehensively, "Just a couple of drops here and there from the potions? Nothing else is required?"

"Those are the instructions that Lord Elrond has given me."

The Dwarven king nodded. Well then, might as well get started to see what this medicine could really do. "Can someone hand me some broth and a spoon?"

Several pairs of hands eagerly passed along a small, broth-filled wooden bowl along with the requested utensil from the back of the tent to where Thorin was sitting. The Dwarf took both items gratefully and carefully added the prescribed dosage to the spoonful of soup. Curiously, the vividly coloured droplets turned clear once in contact with the other liquids and Thorin narrowed his eyes at the mixture. He lifted the spoon closer and took a tentative sniff, not at all surprised to find it smelled only of the beef broth. The king frowned deeply at Elrond's sorcery. Colourless and scentless potions that were no doubt tasteless as well. How dangerous.

Elrond might be the most talented healer in the land, but that did not mean that Thorin would stop being suspicious of his seedy Elven ways.

"I assure you, if the Elves wanted you dead, they would prefer to use their bows and arrows rather than poison," Gandalf said dryly when Thorin looked like he was inches away from calling Óin to do further inspections. The Wizard was waiting for the king with an air of impatience, having already tilted Bilbo's head in position from the opposite side of the bed. "If everything is to your satisfaction, can we please carry on?"

The knot in Thorin's chest loosened, and he could breathe a little easier at the Wizard's words. He may have taken things a bit far with his suspicion. Feeling a bit shamefaced, the Dwarven king refused to dignify Gandalf with an answer (the Wizard's smug smirk was telling enough as it was). He turned to Bilbo and tenderly fed him the spoonful, making sure not to spill a single drop. The Hobbit swallowed the medicine easily enough, and all the Dwarves in the room leaned closer, watching with wide eyes and baited breath. A hush of unnatural, tense silence fell over the tent, and everyone stared expectedly at Bilbo's still form.

A few minutes passed. Thorin could hear the distant rumblings of a heavy, wooden cart and the muffled shouts of Khuzdul from outside of the tent.

They waited some more.

Absolutely nothing happened.

A cacophony of noise started all at once as everyone tried to speak over each other:

"Did you use the correct dosage? Did you feed it to him properly?"

"I knew we shouldn't have trusted those Elves. HA!"

"Maybe we should wait for Elrond's healers to arrive and ask them what went wrong."

"Mahal knows what we just fed the poor Hobbit."

"Shouldn't we wait a little longer? Maybe the medicine is slow acting. Really, really, slow acting."

"We barely saved him from being crushed by get-well presents only to endanger his life with this so-called medicine! The Valar must really like irony."

"EVERYONE QUIET!" Fíli bellowed out with his uninjured hand cupped to his mouth. At the ensuing silence, he continued more sedately, "Gandalf wants to say something."

"Yes, thank you Fíli," The grey Wizard cleared his throat. "Healing magic does not work instantaneously. Why do you think Lord Elrond supplied us with a month's worth of potions?" He shook his head at the Dwarves' loud groans of disappointment, and Thorin felt the buildup of hope since Gandalf's return slowly ebbing away. "Unfortunately, we can't rush results. The only thing to do is to wait."

Dwalin reached over and gave his despondent king a well-meaning pat on the shoulders. "Bilbo has been improving and will most likely continue to improve. We can count that as a blessing," the grim Dwarf mumbled, but the Dwarven king could hear the sincerity in his friend's voice. Despite his gruff demeanor, the warrior was surprisingly insightful and knew when to offer words of comfort, curt as they may be. Thorin could not find another friend whose advice he would listen to more, save for Balin.

The king nodded to Dwalin and turned to reach for Bilbo's hand again, seeking reassurance against the tendrils of disappointment and resignation that were creeping into him. He stared at his Hobbit's peaceful, sleeping face, at the bandages that were buried under the soft curls of his hair, and wished for the umpteenth time that there was something, *anything* he could do besides waiting. Thorin was a Dwarf of action; he always performed best with a clear goal in mind, whether this meant jumping into the heat of battle or trekking on a dangerous road to reclaim his lost home. This inability to do anything but to sit silently and hope for the best had worn his spirit raggedly thin.

Thorin absentmindedly traced circles along the warm flesh of the Hobbit's palm in a motion that was repeated thousands of times, running his thumb up to the base of Bilbo's short fingers. His thoughts derailed at the feel of several small calluses that were undoubtedly formed from sword handling, calluses that had no reason to belong in the hands of a gentle, respectable Baggins of Bag End. The Dwarf found himself unexpectedly warmed by that notion.

A proof of strength in a seemingly soft outward appearance, Thorin mused, the thought endearing Bilbo to him all the more, and it occurred to him that Dwalin was right: Bilbo was strong and he was healing. It might take some time and there might not be anything for Thorin to do, but the Hobbit was fighting his hardest to recover. For now, his faith in Bilbo would have to be enough.

"What happens if we run out?" Bofur asked meekly from beside the severely depleted food table. He shifted uncomfortably in place at interrupting the temporary lull of silence in the tent. "Will we need to travel to Rivendell for some more?"

"Couldn't we just ask the Eagles for a lift?" Glóin chimed in.

"The Great Eagles are a noble race. They are not to be used as mere pack mules or riding ponies!" Gandalf huffed, absolutely appalled on behalf of his Eagle friends. "Besides, the healers from Erebor should know how to brew more once

they have arrived."

"I received a missive from the Blue Mountains this morning." Thorin released his hold on Bilbo and idly rubbed his temple with his newly freed hand, suddenly remembering that he had meant to tell this to his companions. "They are gathering all the Dwarves who are interested in coming back to Erebor. A caravan should be leaving by the month's end. We can ask them to stop at Rivendell as well, if need be."

Thorin looked up to see everyone gaping at him in surprise. He gave them his usual quirk of his lips and waited quietly until they digested what he just said. At the Dwarves' growing excitement, the king could feel his expression soften into a full-fledged smile. This was the confirmation they had all been waiting for; the Dwarves immediately broke out in loud whoops and fist pumps at the good news, rushing to give each other smothering bear hugs.

"We will finally see our friends and family again! It's been far too long!"

"I look forward to reuniting with my sweetheart. Did you know that she makes the most divine meat stew?"

"To think that I could finally see my beautiful wife and son! I wonder how much he's grown!" That was clearly Glóin. He was the only one Thorin could recognize over the sounds of laughter and chatter.

Meanwhile from beside the king, Fíli and Kíli brought their heads close together, trading wild grins and rapid whispered sentences with each other. It looked like they were already starting to furiously plan for their mother's arrival.

"Well, I think this is cause for a proper celebration!" Dori tightened his hold on Ori. The poor young Dwarf was struggling weakly to break free from his brother's one-armed hug. "A proper toast needs to be made to those who will soon be on the road back home"—His tone gentled as he turned to the cot—"and to our Hobbit, who is well on the road to recovery." A loud cheer rose from the Company members in unison.

"Come, my friends, I think we have made ourselves enough of a nuisance. Master Baggins needs his rest." Balin said calmly, though the twinkle in his eyes betrayed his excitement.

"Aye! We shall celebrate outside and leave our Burglar in peace. Besides, we need to spread this message to our kin from the Iron Mountain." Bofur grinned widely. He looked happier and lighter than he had in days. "And we need to find more ale!"

One by one, the Dwarves paused to bid their king, the Wizard, and the Hobbit good evening before carrying dirty cutlery and bowls out of the tent, in good spirits and talking happily amongst themselves. Bifur was the last to leave, and he broke away from the group to talk enthusiastically, in a rapid slew of Khuzdul and wild hand gestures, to Thorin. He finished with a flourish by slapping hard at his own chest then pulled a beautiful wooden carving from his pocket. Grinning, he shoved it into the king's hands, gestured to Bilbo, and walked off, whistling a jaunty tune.

Thorin looked down at what was handed to him.

It was a carving of a miniature Bilbo punching a dragon in the face.

Huh.

"I don't think I will ever understand him, Uncle," Fíli squinted his eyes, peering at Bilbo's gift in confusion. "But his skills are unparalleled. Look at those details!"

"I wish I had a carving of me like that," Kíli said wistfully from behind his older brother. He paused briefly to think before adding in a rush, "While wearing a fur overcoat, of course. For extra levels of majesticness."

Fíli nodded enthusiastically at his brother as if what he had said made perfect sense.

It was comments like those that made Thorin worry about his nephews sometimes.

"What are you both still doing here?" the king asked, curious that the two Dwarves were still lingering. "You should be celebrating."

"Oh, we were planning to change Master Baggins's bandages. We wanted to help where we can."

And it was actions like those that reminded the Dwarven king how fiercely he loved his nephews.

"Leave this to me," Thorin replied kindly to Fíli and Kíli. "Go join the rest of the Company." He interrupted his heirs before they could protest. "I know you have a lot to plan for when your mother arrives, go have fun."

The young Dwarves grinned widely and with a quick goodbye, they dashed out the tent. Thorin called to their retreating backs, "Stay out of mischief!" He doubted they would listen but at least, he could tell Dís that he tried.

Gandalf chuckled at the spectacle. "Oh, to be young and full of life." He shifted his gaze to his friend suddenly, giving him a bemused, knowing look. Thorin could feel himself sweat a little at the Wizard's attention. "Now, what was it that you've been waiting to ask me?"

The king fought against squirming guiltily in his chair. When did he become this easy to gauge?

He took several, calming breaths, opening and closing his mouth a few times in speechlessness, then cleared his throat and started to ask, "I wanted to know if you had the chance to speak with Lord Elrond on the issues of…" he grimaced as if he was in great pain but forced himself to spit out the last of the sentence, "on the issues of Gold Fever." There, Thorin had said it, although he had gritted that last bit out through clenched teeth.

The grey Wizard smiled at him beatifically. This did not make the Dwarf feel any better.

Gandalf shifted so that his staff rested comfortably in the crook of his elbow. He spoke lightly, “Lord Elrond said that while Dwarves are more easily swayed by the love of treasure, Gold Fever can be prevented.” Thorin listened to Gandalf with rapt attention, quickly brushing aside his wounded pride.

“Find someone you would willingly devote yourself to, someone whom you would gladly trade away all the gold and silver in the world without a second thought,” Gandalf shrugged nonchalantly, but he smiled at the Dwarf like he held all the secrets of Middle-Earth.

“And never lose sight of your love for him.”

There are some things that are worth more than all the treasures in the world.

Thorin realized that he might have found him already.

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21 November, T.A 2491

The armies were right outside of their gates and Thorin would not do anything about it.

No, that’s not true, Bilbo thought scathingly in frustration. *Thorin did something about it alright. He fired an arrow at the messenger.*

It was a lucky thing that the soldier had been warned about the Dwarves. He calmly blocked the arrow in a move that clearly suggested he was expecting to be fired at.

Then, he promptly declared, in a bored monotonous tone no less, that Erebor was officially held under siege by the Elves and Lake-town Men, and that had been that.

Thorin and the Dwarves had the audacity to laugh at the messenger’s retreating back. Why should they worry? They had fresh water and a stock pile of supplies, they were well protected from the barricades at the South gate, and Dain was arriving in two days’ time. *Let’s wait it out,* they said. *The Elves and Men can do us no harm!*

Great, just great.

In the mean time, the Company members continued to frolic merrily near the treasure room and to celebrate what they believed to be their imminent victory. They had permanently set up camp right by the treasury’s entrance and nobody, absolutely nobody, seemed to think that this was a terrible, horrible idea.

Nobody except for Bilbo of course, but then again, none of the Dwarves really listened to him whenever he brought this issue up anymore. The Hobbit had kept a close eye on his friends, trying to find some ways to curb the dark greed from utterly consuming his companions but to no success. How could one begin to help someone who, not only was completely uninterested in receiving help, but continued to revel, and quite happily so, in their addiction?

He did not want to admit it, but it was very clear that his Dwarven friends were a lost cause if the Hobbit continued to do nothing but talk to them about this issue. Bilbo had even brought this problem up to Thorin again, who at the very least genuinely cared to listen to Bilbo’s feelings, but the king was insistent that there were no problems with the Dwarves.

And how would he recognize that there is a problem? Bilbo could feel his head hurt from thinking. He had been stuck on the same issues for weeks on end now with no solution in sight. *Thorin himself is just as enthralled by the treasure, except in his case, he is specifically obsessed with the Arkenstone.*

In the dark moments where he was surrounded by nothing but constant worry and anger, Bilbo felt perfectly justified in his decision to hide the gem. No good could come to giving Thorin the Heart of the Mountain and he was glad that he chose to keep this secret for so long.

If only Bilbo’s resolve remained firm whenever the Dwarven king gave him soft, shy smiles to lift Bilbo from his foul mood. If only the Hobbit did not feel so soul crushingly guilty whenever Thorin wrapped his strong arms around him, pressing him close, so close, that the steady rhythm of the Dwarf’s heartbeat became a soothing hum that threatened to chase away all of Bilbo’s worries. Stripped from his blanket of self-righteous fury, Bilbo wasn’t sure what to do about anything, whether it was about the Arkenstone, about the armies outside, about his loss of control over his feelings for one Thorin Oakenshield…

He did not think he had ever felt so helpless and terrified, but if he was honest with himself, what could he possibly do? He was an ordinary Hobbit with no special talents except the minimal sword handling skills that he gained very recently. If he ever had the misfortune of being in a genuine, one-on-one sword fight, Bilbo doubt he’d come out of it alive. He could barely parry!

He laughed humourlessly at that depressing string of thoughts. At the rate he was going, he could give Thorin a run for his money in brooding.

“What are you thinking that has got you wearing such a serious expression, my dear Master Baggins?” A deep, husky voice sounded teasingly next to his ear and Bilbo closed his eyes, focusing on keeping his emotions in check.

Bilbo was gently spun around by a pair of warm hands on his arms. When he continued to keep his eyes stubbornly closed, he felt Thorin's large palm brush delicately against his cheek, making him flush at the Dwarf's reverent touch. The Hobbit sighed, soaking up the warmth that was plastered along the side of his face as he felt the last of his anger drain away. His hands moved up to cradle Thorin's naked hand and wrist by his head, pleased that the Dwarf had forgone his bracers. Bilbo pressed a quick, light kiss against a patch of delicate skin on the Dwarf's wrist before opening his eyes and looking straight into the king's worried blue ones.

"Bilbo," The Dwarf repeated softly. The teasing tone was gone and in its place was concern. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

The sound of the rest of the Dwarves' raucous celebration drifted past Bilbo, along with the lively melodies of flutes, viols, fiddles, and drums. The company members had uncovered a pile of magnificently crafted instruments in the treasure hoard and were putting them to good use with utmost enthusiasm. Bilbo could not find it in him to join them even when the music was so beautifully played.

"I'm just," the Hobbit trailed off awkwardly and he swallowed heavily as he released his hold on Thorin's arm. He really had no idea where to begin answering the Dwarf's seemingly simple question. Many things were wrong, as far as he was concerned, but he had no way of making the Dwarves listen. "I just worry," he finished weakly.

Well, it wasn't the best answer but at least it was honest.

Understanding dawned on Thorin's face and his expression cleared. "Ah, I see," he said kindly. The Dwarf lifted his hand from Bilbo's cheek and settled against his tense shoulder blade, rubbing slow soothing circles that made Bilbo helplessly clutch on the king's fur coat and whimper. His other hand slid to the Hobbit's waist in a protective hold. "You're worried about the Men and Elves that are keeping us trapped." Thorin leaned in and pressed a kiss against Bilbo's brow that made him shiver lightly. He tightened his arms around the Hobbit and moved his lips to whisper possessively against his burglar's forehead, "They will not hurt you. I will not allow it."

A wave of disappointment crashed over Bilbo, cutting through the haze of pleasure. He frowned. That…was not as reassuring to him as Thorin had intended. The Hobbit was hoping more along the lines of *not* getting into any scuffles that would warrant protection against the Elves and Men in the first place.

Bilbo wrapped his arms loosely above the Dwarf's hips and moved back a little to have some more space to think, to breathe. "Is there no way we can make peace with the Men?" His voice did not waver once, but Bilbo asked with a level of confidence that he did not feel.

Predictably, the Dwarven king shook his head gravely without even taking a second to consider. "Not when those meddling Elves are there and even then, the Men wish to rob us of our treasure. I will not have my people suffer through another humiliation."

Again, what was with the Dwarves' belief that the Men were out to rob them? The Hobbit felt his temper flare and without thinking, he opened his mouth to protest –

"Oi, lovebirds! You'll have plenty of alone time afterwards. Right now, it's time to join in the celebration!"

Surprised, Thorin and Bilbo whipped their heads toward a grinning Nori, who was flushed and swaying slightly on his feet. Both of his hands were clenched tightly around a wine bottle's neck, and he raised a bottle to salute his king, completely ignoring Thorin's glare. "Look, we found the wine! Come on, join us before we polish it all off without you."

Just like that, the tension Bilbo had felt left in a violent rush and he was able to take a deep breath to compose himself. He heard Thorin grumble something unpleasant sounding in Khuzdul and fought down his smile. The interruption could not have come at a more perfect time and he really did not want to risk another argument with the king, not when his nerves were frayed and he might end up saying things he did not mean.

Pushing that thought aside, the Hobbit gave the Dwarven king a rueful smile. *We should go peacefully before the reinforcements arrive*, Bilbo thought resignedly. He had a feeling that neither of them would get a moment of peace unless they joined the rest of the company.

The Halfling leaned up, pecked the king on the lips one last time, and slowly detangled himself from his hold. Thorin sighed deeply and spoke so softly that only Bilbo could hear his long-suffering tone, "We might as well join them. I fear the damage they would do to themselves if we leave them alone for too long." He added a brief second later, "I also fear what they would do to us otherwise."

Bilbo really had to choke down a bark of laughter this time around. It seemed they both had shared the same train of thought.

With Thorin's hand a comfortable weight against the small of his back, the Hobbit and the Dwarf walked towards the source of music and loud chattering. Nori followed slowly, steadying himself on the wall and taking swigs from either one of his wine bottles along the way.

Predictably, the party was already in full swing when they reached the camp site. Great torches were lit, making the air just shy of being uncomfortably warm while the light from the flames cast a flickering, golden glow over the area. The

Dwarves were lounging in disarray on a circle of thick, luxurious pelts that were liberally strewn across the dark, marbled floors. Wine bottles and food were generously spread around them and Bilbo's mouth watered at the tantalizing smell of cooked meat. Next to an unopened crate of wine, Bofur, Bombur and Ori were playing a spirited song with most of the other Dwarves joining in at random verses, laughing and mocking each other if they missed a beat or played off tune. A large empty space was made at the centre of the circle for what Bilbo guessed was dancing. The Hobbit paused to peer confusedly at Kíli's and Fíli's awkwardly flailing limbs and hoped that they were doing *some* kind of a dance as opposed to hopping around in excruciating pain. Bilbo continued to let his eyes wander until he spotted his travel pack, stacked with the rest of the supplies in a massive heap beside the Treasury's entrance. He felt his shoulders relax. The Arkenstone was still safely hidden.

"Look who finally dropped in! It's his Majesty and Master Baggins!" Glóin exclaimed unnecessarily loudly, his cheeks flushed from the wine.

All the Dwarves temporarily paused their playing to greet the newcomers happily. Thorin regally inclined his head in acknowledgement and led Bilbo by the wrist to a platter of spectacularly roasted game bird, to his great pleasure.

Goodness, he was starving. How had he not realized this sooner?

Bilbo attacked his food like a man who hadn't had a decent meal in years, or a Dwarf who hadn't had red meat in days. The first bite was absolute heaven; the succulent juicy meat and thin crispy skin were well seasoned and perfectly cooked. Bilbo quickly found himself devouring large bites of the bird, foregoing his usual table manners.

"Wow, Uncle. What did you do with Bilbo that has made him this hungry?"

Kíli and Fíli had plonked themselves uninvited to the right of Bilbo, shifting on the rug until they made themselves rather comfortable. Normally, the Hobbit would have happily ignored the two young Dwarves and continued feasting, but the twin mischievous grins they were sporting made him stop. It spelled trouble.

The Hobbit could also feel Thorin stiffen next to him.

"Not to mention, what were you doing with Bilbo that kept you both away from the party?" Kíli asked, false innocence colouring his tone.

Fíli smirked. "It must be extremely taxing, for Bilbo to be hungry like that."

"Probably involved a lot of stamina."

"And interesting positions."

"And a lot of sweating."

"And hot man-on-man action – "

"Alright, that's enough from the two of you!" Thorin's cheeks were tinted lightly and he scowled heavily at his nephews, "I thought I raised you both to be more decent than this, talking about such things over dinner while there is company present." He waved at the visibly flustered, shell-shocked Bilbo, who was clutching frozenly on a drumstick.

The two brothers blinked at Thorin in confusion; it would have been convincing if they did not look like they were ready to burst into laughter. "Whatever do you mean, Uncle? Fíli and I thought you were sparring with Bilbo again."

Without missing a beat, the blond Dwarf added, "I'm pretty sure Bilbo would agree that it's extremely important to know how to handle your sword."

The Dwarven king spluttered incoherently. His face was a matching shade of red with Bilbo's.

Fíli and Kíli looked at each other and broke down into loud, knee-slapping guffaws. They sprawled on the rug, arms clutching desperately at their sides.

Thorin pressed both palms against his eyes in a move that clearly screamed frustration and mortification. He looked like he was mentally counting to ten. Bilbo would have felt terrible for him if he wasn't so busy feeling mortified himself. "What do you two menaces want?" the Dwarf finally growled, having had enough of his nephews' braying laughter.

The two little hellions rolled themselves back into sitting position. They took some time to school their features, letting loose a few stray chuckles here and there until most of their manic humour had left them.

"Actually, we wanted to know more about Erebor." Fíli wiped the tears from his eyes and continued, "A story about its glory days would go well with our celebration."

"And who better to ask than our esteemed Uncle?" Kíli piped in. He was sitting cross-legged with his elbows on his knees, resting his chin on his fists.

"Well if it's a story you want, I've got plenty to offer!" Bilbo jumped as Balin seemingly materialized out of nowhere. The old Dwarf sat down heavily across from them, thrusting an opened bottle of wine at his king. Thorin grabbed it without hesitation and took a long, desperate mouthful. *Probably trying to drown out those last few minutes with his nephews*, the Hobbit thought, eagerly eyeing the wine as well because *yes, he's been mentally scarred as well and would very much like to have some, thank you!* Thorin saw his sad, longing look, quirked his lips into a half-smile, and automatically passed the bottle to Bilbo.

“Erebor was known across Middle-Earth, aside from being a great Dwarven fortress with unsurpassable wealth, for three things.” Balin reached into his coat to fish for his pipe and pipe weed. “The pride of Erebor, as they were known. Care to take a guess on what they are?”

“The Arkenstone,” Fíli was quick to answer, especially when this very same gem had been in the forethought of everyone’s mind since they had arrived to the Lonely Mountain. Bilbo tried not to squirm guiltily from his seat.

“The great skills of our craftsmen,” Kíli replied confidently. Metal work was something all Dwarves had to learn, regardless of station or gender. Naturally, they would openly boast in being the best.

Balin took a long puff from his lit pipe and blew a large smoke ring. Satisfied, he spoke again, “Yes, well those are two of the three. Very good!” Kíli and Fíli preened at the compliment. Balin continued, “The Arkenstone, also known as the Heart of the Mountain, was a symbol for the line of Durin’s divine right to rule.” Balin paused briefly, letting his words sink in. “As for our great ability to craft masterpieces with all things stone and metal, this is a skill taught to us by the great Mahal. To perfect it is one of the greatest honours a Dwarf can obtain.” At this point, Bilbo noticed that all the other Dwarves had crowded closer to listen. Balin calmly took another puff from his pipe. “Now what about the third?”

“The Great Army!” Ori called out from his corner of the fur pelt. The older Dwarves gave a round of cheers, each of them lifting their bottles and mugs in respect.

“The Great Army of Erebor,” Balin agreed. He took a slow breath then began to speak in his deep, slow voice, “King Thror recognized that the safety of his people was paramount. He dedicated a portion of Erebor’s wealth to fund a great army.” The Dwarf’s voice was tinged with pride and his eyes had a faraway look to them. “At its peak, the King commanded 50,000 Dwarves strong, fighting fit and ready to defend the Mountain at any time. The soldiers took pride in upholding the values of a true Dwarven warrior and were trained rigorously until they became experts at using various melee weapons. Battle axes, battle hammers, long swords, short swords, maces, spears and flails; a captain of the army was expected to be proficient in all of these weapons.”

Dwalin silently handed his older brother his bottle of wine and Balin took a sip. Licking his lips, he carried on with his story, “Needless to say, it took a years and years of dedication to rise in the ranks of the army. Years of hard work, discipline, sweat, tears and blood. Not a lot of Dwarves succeeded, but those who did were held in great esteem.”

“The Great Army of Erebor gained a reputation for being strong and fearless. They refused to back away from their foes, no matter what kind of enemies they may face.” There was a harshness to Balin’s face that Bilbo did not recognize, but it sent terrible shivers down his spine. “Whether their enemies were waves of detestable Orcs and Goblins, who would ruthlessly pray on all manners of people but especially on the weak, or the brash Men, known for their unpredictable, reckless nature to cause the same amount of good as evil, and –“

“Elves! With their smug, superior attitude, who would rather see the world burn around them than to lend a helping hand!” Dori said bitterly, face flushed in anger and looking utterly disgusted. The other Dwarves cried out in agreement. The older Dwarves, especially, were getting more and more riled up at the memory of the fateful day when their supposed allies betrayed them. Bilbo could feel all the anger and hatred pouring from the Dwarves, ready to boil over at a moment’s notice and he had no idea how to stop it from happening.

“The Elves who sat by and watched our children and women burn to ashes by Smaug the Terrible!”

“The Elves who turned away when we were begging for aid!”

“The Great Army feared no Orcs, Goblins, Elves or Men, and neither do we!”

“Yeah, least of all the thieves who were perched outside our gates as we speak!”

“Friends, you speak of the truth!” Thorin brusquely stood up, interrupting the others’ tirade. His expression was so dark and murderous that Bilbo could feel the beginning of a cold sweat starting to form on his forehead. “Those thieves are trying to prey on us, now that our army is no more. But the Dwarven warrior spirit is strong in every one of us and we shall not be quelled!”

Thorin continued confidently with his back straight and his eyes unwavering from his adoring subjects. To Bilbo, he looked every inch of a warrior king. “And when our kinsman, Dain, comes, we shall once again show our enemies the glory of the Dwarven army!”

“We shall make them pay in a pound of blood and flesh for every coin and gem they thought to take from us!” the Dwarven king roared out among the jubilant cries of the company members.

“For Erebor!” The Dwarves chanted together as they raised their fists into the air, “For Erebor!”

And Bilbo looked despairingly around him, at the bloodthirsty hunger in the Dwarves eyes, at the sheer malicious intent that was dripping from their cries, and knew with a sinking heart that he had run out of time.

Gold Fever had completely stolen the last vestiges of hope for peace. He was too late to save his friends from a path of *war, loss, ruin, pain –*

Death.

Bilbo unexpectedly found himself locking eyes with his travel pack.

No, it's not too late. Not yet.

His mind was turning as a new plan began to hatch. If Thorin refused to carry on peace talks with the Men, he would have to do something drastic to force the Dwarf into it. Or at the very least, find a way where the Dwarf would willingly trade a portion of his treasure.

And he knew just the way to do it.

Bilbo looked up at Thorin with bright eyes and wearing a broken-hearted smile.

He silently said goodbye in his heart.

The Hobbit could only cling on to the desperate wish that the Dwarf would someday forgive him for what he would do next.

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24 December, T.A 2491

The cluster of white healing tents stood out against the backdrop of the colourful army tents. It served as a spot of peacefulness among the noisy, bustling surroundings where a stream of Dwarves, Men, and Elves were constantly moving around on errands. Inside, the healing tents were kept warm, clean and sparse, with the exception of one, which was packed with all sorts of gifts and trinkets from well-wishers. Bilbo Baggins laid in that tent, on a cot draped in luxurious fur skins that kept him very comfortable for the past month since he had been brought there.

Thorin had long since become accustomed to the sight of that specific healing tent; he carefully side-stepped new piles of presents to take his place on a rickety wooden seat beside the cot. Ever so gently, he reached over to cradle the Hobbit's left hand in his own scarred ones like he had done every time he came in for a visit.

"You would be glad to know that Erebor's recovery is going well." He spoke softly as he shifted in the hard seat. Despite spending so much time there, he had failed to bring a better padded chair over or at least, a cushion to make himself more comfortable. The wooden chair would creak horribly whenever the Dwarf moved in the slightest motion but he paid it no mind. "We have finished burying those who fell during the Battle and Smaug's attack. The monument built in their honour is half-completed." Thorin traced soothing circles with his thumb along the painfully familiar surface at the back of the Hobbit's hand.

"We had another meeting with the Elves and Men today. The Dwarves agreed to help lay out the stone foundations of the buildings in New Dale. In return for our services, the Men agreed to provide food for us from the farms they have set up. The Elves will be joining in to help with the food situation as well." Thorin grimaced at the thought of Elves but it was out of habit rather than genuine anger. Still, he would rather not think about Thranduil if he could help it to avoid unpleasant memories from being dredged up. It would take him decades to let go of his old hatred, but the Dwarf was taking it one step at a time.

Thorin shifted again, trying to find a position that would put less strain on his aching muscles. He had spent the last few days putting in new support pillars in Erebor and he was paying the price for it. Wooden chairs were really unforgiving to those who have been sitting for a long while and he cursed himself for not bringing a cushion again.

"Rest assured, no one has killed each other yet. We are all too busy at the moment." At this, the Dwarven king smiled wryly. He suspected that Thranduil still carried murderous tendencies, but he was keeping that opinion away from his gentle Bilbo.

The Dwarf allowed his eyes to roam over the peaceful expression on the Halfling's face, at his head wrapped in white gauze, and at the curly hair that fanned across his pillow like a halo.

Bilbo Baggins did not respond. He had remained deeply unconscious for the past month.

Thorin Oakenshield sighed and carried on his daily report, refusing to let the wave of sadness bleed into his voice.

"Balin is working closely with Bard on Dale's new layout. Out of all the Dwarves, he remembered the most about the original city, so we thought it was fitting to get him involved in the planning. Bard also asked me to give you this." The king reached into his pocket and pulled a delicate necklace with a metal bow and arrow as the pendant. He placed it gently into the Hobbit's palm and curled his own fingers around Bilbo's. "Bard and the Lake-town Men did not have the opportunity to thank you properly for all that you have done for them. They hope that you will accept the necklace as one of their tokens of appreciation. I believe they have more plans in mind once you recover."

Thorin lowered his voice into a near whisper, suddenly feeling shy for what he was about the say next. "As do I, my dear Bilbo. I have many plans for us. The first thing I would like to do is to apologize profusely for all the grievances I have caused you." His voice broke and he cleared his throat before continuing, "And if you would have me again, I would like to officially announce my intention to court you in public, so that everyone would know how important you are to me."

The king released the Hobbit's hand to lay his palm against Bilbo's cheek. He caressed it slowly, all the while marvelling at the colour that returned to his Burglar's face. The bruises and cuts had faded away, leaving behind smooth, flawless skin except for the thin silvery line near Bilbo's right brow. Óin's salves had really done wonders on reducing the effects of scarring.

Thorin continued his original train of thought using the same soft reverent tone from before, "Finally, I would like you to meet my sister Dís, who is more than delighted to tell you embarrassing stories of my wayward youth." Thorin chuckled. His sister would make his life a living hell but if it meant that Bilbo was awake for it, then he would gladly endure it a thousand times over. He couldn't help but to add cheekily though, "Not that I worry of course. After all, I've been told that I was the shining example of decorum."

He smirked, remembering that fateful conversation at the balconies that felt like a lifetime ago, that meeting that had started it all, "In fact, a certain Hobbit was most confident that I was a virtuous child.

"And for the record, I stand by what I said. I was nothing at all like my two nephews."

Thorin sat in comfortable silence for a while longer, amazed that being in Bilbo's presence relaxed him to the point where he could no longer hear the constant buzzing of his thoughts in his mind. The king realized that he had already fallen into a comfortable routine where he would visit the Hobbit after a long day of work, unwind as he told Bilbo all about his day, and, on some occasions, shamefully whine about his problems, before departing with a kiss and a promise to visit again. It was all becoming horribly domestic, but Thorin found it all surprisingly enjoyable. He still had bad days when the crushing guilt in his heart was so strong, it took all of his will power not to grasp tightly at Bilbo's hand and beg him to wake up, but his faith in the Hobbit's recovery was holding up.

It would have to be enough.

Smiling fondly, Thorin leaned over to press a kiss over Bilbo's lips, then two quick ones over his eyelids and one on his left cheek. "Unfortunately, it's time for me to go." He spoke softly over the Hobbit's ear, wishing that he could shed his kingly duties and stay as long as he wanted, "but I promise I will be back tomorrow."

The Dwarven king straightened up and made ready to leave, only to be pulled back when his surcoat snagged on something on the cot. Frowning slightly, he looked down to see if he could tug his coat free and instead, saw Bilbo's hand clutching tightly at the fur. He blinked in confusion.

Wait. What?

He whipped his head up and found himself pinned by a set of sluggish blue eyes, opened to half-mast. Frozen on his spot, Thorin watched, mouth suddenly dry and completely in shock, as Bilbo Baggins gazed blearily at him for a few seconds, before mumbling out tiredly, "Th'rin, rem'ber to bring a cush'n fr the chair."

A short bark of incredulous laughter left the Dwarf's mouth and all Thorin could think about was how it was so good to hear Bilbo speak again. He had almost forgotten how breathtakingly beautiful Bilbo's eyes looked, and he would die a happy Dwarf if he could spend the rest of eternity drowning in those eyes, so long as they continued to look at him. *Please don't stop looking at him*.

Thank you Mahal, thank you, thank you, thankyouthankyouthankyou.

Before he knew what was happening, he had already bent over and crushed his Hobbit in a fierce hug, his hands shaking, and he couldn't stop, wouldn't stop raining kisses all along the side of his beloved's face.

For the first time since the Battle, Thorin Oakenshield felt like he could finally breathe again.

"Thorin."

"Yes?"

"Is…is that a carving of me punching a dragon in the face?"

END

Notes:

Hello people! Sorry for posting this so late. RL happened. Then a flu/fever combo. I'm currently in bed, coughing up a lung, thanking the world for its lovely invention of cold medicine.

Anyway, IT IS DONE!!! This bad boy took me 56 pages on Word. 56 PAGES!! I was not expecting this kind of length for my first fanfic. (Honestly, I initially planned to cap it at 10 pages. Oh how very naïve I was…)

THANK YOU to everyone who oh-so-lovingly commented, kudo's, recced, favorite, bookmarked, placed this on alert! I do notice your efforts and I appreciate every single one of them.

On that final note – this has been a very entertaining experience for me and it taught me a lot about the art of creative story-telling. Thanks everyone for putting up with this *handwaves*. I may or may not continue to write some brand new stuff in the future. Meh, we shall see :)

Notes about this chapter!

[1] Gandalf travelled halfway from Rivendell to Erebor by Eagle. He had to make the rest of his way on horseback because Eagles are not ponies. Like Loki, they do what they want.

[2] Fun fact: don't feed an unconscious person a large amount of liquid. It's a choking hazard. However, an unconscious patient can still ingest a few milliliters (~0.1 oz for you American fans) of fluid at a time either because of swallowing reflex or from the force of gravity when lifting the head up.
Of course, a much faster way would be to deliver medication via enema (which was used commonly in the past). I'll just leave you with that pleasant mental image.

[3] Bifur was the one to spread the story about Bilbo punching the dragon in the face. He did it for the lulz.

[4] Kili and Fili's innuendos/conversation with Thorin took me a grand total of 1 minute to type up and was the easiest thing I came up with to date. Between this and my ease at writing violent scenes, I have come the conclusion that I am a horrible human being. D:

[5] The last segment of the fic was specifically written to mirror the first part of the first chapter, 'cause in my mind, I see the events in my fic like a movie and I like seeing visual symmetry. I'm a weird dork like that.

Catch you on the flip side!

Close (#)